



# THE WOMAN IN RED











THE  
W O M A N I N R E D

A Romance

BY

W STEPHENS HAYWARD

AUTHOR OF 'HUNTED TO DEATH,' 'LOVE AGAINST THE WORLD'  
ETC. ETC. ETC.



LONDON  
JOHN AND ROBERT MAXWELL  
MILTON HOUSE, SHOE LANE, FLEET STREET

*[All rights reserved]*

## MR. W. S. HAYWARD'S NOVELS. CHEAP UNIFORM EDITION.

*Price 2s. each; cloth, 2s. 6d. each.*

LOVE AGAINST THE WORLD. A Novel. Superior in humour to "Harry Lorrequer"; equal in interest to "Lady Audley's Secret."

HUNTED TO DEATH. A Novel of the most alluring interest.

PERILS OF A PRETTY GIRL. A Novel founded on Real Life, and of supreme intensity.

ETHEL GREY. A Novel unsurpassed for dramatic power and depth of plot.

MAUDE LUTON. A Novel descriptive of the most charming traits of Woman's Nature.

CAROLINE. A Novel of the most captivating character, full of variety, pathos, and feminine interest.

THE THREE RED MEN. A Novel possessing all the charms of romance and all the graces of a genuine love story.

JOHN HAZEL'S VENGEANCE. A Novel of the most enthralling interest, and of the strongest domestic character.

BARBARA HOME. A Tale fraught with the most bewitching romance.

THE SECRET SEVEN. A mysterious revelation of love and misdeeds.

THE WOMAN IN RED. Founded on the celebrated Adelphi drama.

THE STOLEN WILL. Clear in design and picturesque in description.

THE BLACK FLAG. Sparkling as the sea on which the action passes.

DIANA'S DEFENDER. A Novel that *rivals in intensity any work of modern fiction*, not excepting the ever memorable "Uncle Tom's Cabin."

LOST LUCY. A Novel.

*[In the Press.]*

..\* Mr. W. STEPHENS HAYWARD'S Novels have taken their place amongst the most popular works of the present day. They command a ready and large sale in the Colonies, where the scenes of some are laid, and where the author passed through many of the incidents so graphically and faithfully described in some of his most interesting Novels.

LONDON: J. & R. MAXWELL, MILTON HOUSE, SHOE LANE, E.C.

# CONTENTS.



## Prologue.

CHAP.	PAGE
I. THE STROLLING PLAYERS . . . . .	1
II. THE MURDER OF MARGARET D'ARBEL . . . . .	11



I. THE PROPHECY . . . . .	17
II. FRANCESCA AND COUNT CLAUDIO . . . . .	24
III. THE ROBBERS BREAK INTO RUDIGA'S HOUSE . . . . .	34
IV. THE VEILED LADY . . . . .	42
V. THE COUNTESS IMPRISONED . . . . .	47
VI. THE PALACE DONATI . . . . .	50
VII. THE COUNTESS RECEIVES A WARNING . . . . .	57
VIII. "NAOMI, BEHOLD YOUR MOTHER!" . . . . .	65
IX. FRANCESCA IS CLAIMED BY RUDIGA . . . . .	69
X. THE COUNTESS AND THE WOMAN IN RED . . . . .	72
XI. BRAVADURA CONSENTS TO ABDUCT FRANCESCA . . . . .	77
XII. ANOTHER PLOT TO CARRY OFF FRANCESCA . . . . .	84
XIII. THE COUNTESS REFUSES THE ORDEAL . . . . .	93
XIV. FRANCESCA TAKES AN OATH . . . . .	102
XV. AN UNWELCOME VISITOR . . . . .	109
XVI. FRANCESCA DONATI—THE MAGICIAN . . . . .	119
XVII. THE CONTENTS OF THE GLOVE—A SURPRISE . . . . .	128
XVIII. "WAIT AND HOPE" . . . . .	136

# CONTENTS.

CHAP.	PAGE
XIX. COUNTS DONATI AND CLAUDIO, THE BANDIT-CHIEFS . . . . .	142
XX. THE CONFERENCE—A NEW FACE . . . . .	150
XXI. THE NIGHT'S EVENTS . . . . .	157
XXII. THE ATTACK AND THE RETREAT . . . . .	168
XXIII. THE WRECKERS AND THEIR PLOT . . . . .	175
XXIV. THE VOYAGE AND THE WRECK . . . . .	183
XXV. NAPLES—A TRIO OF NEW FACES . . . . .	190
XXVI. TWO SIDES OF AN IMPORTANT QUESTION . . . . .	197
XXVII. MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE OF FRANCESCA . . . . .	207
XXVIII. THE BEGGAR OF THE HOTEL ST. MARC . . . . .	214
XXIX. THE ATTACK AND THE RESCUE . . . . .	221
XXX. HUSBAND AND WIFE—THE EXPLANATION . . . . .	227
XXXI. DONATI, CLAUDIO, AND FRANCESCA . . . . .	233
XXXII. AN UNANTICIPATED VOYAGE . . . . .	239
XXXIII. THE MAGICIAN—A FEARFUL RIDE . . . . .	246
XXXIV. THE MYSTERIOUS FRIAR . . . . .	258
XXXV. "THE TIME HAS COME" . . . . .	262
XXXVI. THE PRINCESS ESMERALDA . . . . .	266
XXXVII. THE WOMAN IN RED CLAIMS HER DAUGHTER . . . . .	268
XXXVIII. FRANCESCA DESERTS HER HUSBAND . . . . .	275
XXXIX. THE COUNTESS DONATI VISITS FRANCESCA . . . . .	281
XL. ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL . . . . .	289



# THE WOMAN IN RED

---

## Prologue.

---

### CHAPTER I.

#### THE STROLLING PLAYERS.

THE scene of our tale opens in the village of Castellán, on the French side of the great Alpine range. The inhabitants are a simple, primitive race, in character and habits partaking of the gaiety and enthusiastic nature of the Frenchman, and the quiet, somewhat lazy, contentment of the Italian. An honest living was easily earned in Castellán, without very hard labour or privation. Taxes were scarcely known; the soil was prolific, rents low; and the mountains afforded abundant game for the huntsman, and the valleys pasture for the shepherds' flocks. Thus, then, it happened that the simple-hearted inhabitants led a very pleasant life, dividing their time almost equally between work and play. Fête-days and saints'-days came so often, indeed, that, had all been strictly observed, the crops and the herds would have stood a poor chance.

But to our story.

We will introduce our readers to the cottage of Margaret d'Arbel, a widow woman with one son—a child of some four years. Now the widow's income was scanty, and she did not disdain to eke it out by taking charge of young children whose parents might be compelled to be absent, or unable to attend to them themselves.

At the time of which we speak, the good woman had confided to her charge the infant daughter of ~~one~~ Miriam, wife of Reuben, a Jew trader in gold and jewels. The Jews at this period, and in this happy valley, were not only tolerated, but met with liberal and kind treatment—a singular thing in that age, when persecution and contumely were the rule for this unfortunate race, mercy and kindness the exception.

Reuben had gone over the Alps on an important trading journey, by which he hoped to realise a large sum of money. In this he was not disappointed, for he wrote from Genoa to his wife Miriam to join him there, as he had business for which he needed her aid. He added, at the end of his letter, that he had been fortunate beyond his fondest hope, and not only had made a large sum of money by his mercantile dealings, but had succeeded in recovering a debt which had long been owing him, and which he had despaired of ever receiving.

And now, while the happy wife and husband are hurrying homeward, looking forward to again embracing their infant Naomi, let us see what is being enacted at the cottage of Margaret d'Arbel. When business called Margaret away from her cottage, she



was accustomed to leave it in charge of a village girl named Ninon, who tended the infant daughter of the Jews, and Margaret's own son Claude.

The girl Ninon—young, light-hearted, and coquettish—was one day thus left in charge of the hut, when the sound of music fell on her ear, and running to the door, she espied coming down the street of the village a party of strolling players, headed by a band of a few instruments.

One from among the players stepped up to the girl and accosted her. The man was not ill-looking; but his features bore a dissipated expression, and his attire, though gaudy and pretentious, was by no means neat or elegant.

“Well, my pretty maid,” he said, in jaunty tones, “are you going to patronise us to-night,—to see the thrilling play, the moving scenes; to hear the merry jests with which we shall enliven our audience?”

Now Ninon had never seen a play in her life, and gazed with curiosity and admiration on the gay attire of the stroller.

“And are you going to play to-night, sir? and what is the admission-money?”

“To you, my pretty mountain-bird, nothing. Never let it be said that Victor Sanson, comedian, tragedian, and manager, took money from so charming a damsel. See, here is a card of admission. And now, fair maid, will you give a poor player a drink of milk, or even water?”

“Oh, surely, sir, surely,” cried the girl delightedly. “A card of admission to the play,” she continued, reading the ticket, “and in the front seats!

Oh, this is delightful ! Come in, sir ; come in, pray. I will get you milk."

"Thanks, thanks, sweet one," said Sanson, gallantly chucking her under the chin as he entered.

The girl hurried off, and returned in a moment with a cup of milk, which she gave him.

"My girl," said the stroller jauntily, "will you go after my company, and tell them to encamp—that I am tired, and will rest awhile here?"

"Surely, sir, surely," said Ninon cheerfully. "I will return in a few moments."

Then the girl left the manager of the strolling players to himself.

Sanson surveyed the hut with the air of a man who could appreciate comfort, and who had not been accustomed to much of it.

The girl had not been gone a minute, when another man entered—so stealthily as not to disturb the stroller until he spoke.

"Halloa, friend Sanson!"

He who was addressed started, and an exclamation broke from him :

"Hubert Malissey—not dead!"

"Victor Sanson—not hanged ! Ha, ha, ha !" laughed the other, with grim pleasantry. "I am sure, worthy friend, it is full time."

Sanson gazed at the new-comer as though doubting the evidence of his senses. He who was addressed as Hubert Malissey was by no means a pleasing specimen of humanity. Low-browed, black-haired, swarthy, and of forbidding features, he looked the brawny ruffian he was. His dress partook some-

what of that of a mountain shepherd, dashed with a little of the mendicant, and with a great deal of the brigand and vagabond.

"Why, I thought you were dead—had been shot; so they said."

"So who said?" asked Hubert, smiling grimly.

"Why, all your friends at Genoa."

"Ah! well, you see, for once they were wrong. It is true I was left for dead in the mountains, but was found by a goatherd, who took me to his hut, and tended me till I was well; and now, you see, here I am."

"And what are you doing here?"

"What am I doing here? Ha, ha! that's good. Why, do you know that this is my house, my furniture?"

"Yours!"

"Yes, mine."

"How?"

"Do you know who occupies this house?"

"Not a bit."

"Then I will tell you: one Margaret d'Arbel, supposed to be a widow."

"Well, what of that?"

"Every thing of that, my friend, considering that Margaret d'Arbel is not a widow."

"Not a widow!" said Sanson.

"No; for her husband is alive."

"Alive!"

"Yes; and I am he."

"The devil!"

"Ay, it is the devil indeed. And now, friend

Sanson, let me ask you a question : What are you doing here ?”

“What am I doing here ?—nothing. I saw a pretty girl at the door, and, making an excuse that I wanted a drink, entered ; that is all. And you—have you come to claim your wife, after your long absence ?”

“Not I. Listen, Sanson.” Hubert approached, and said in a low tone : “I’ve got a little business on ; I have come for a child.”

“A child !—your own child ?” said Sanson, who was completely mystified.

“Confound it ! no, man. Some one else’s child—a girl. A thousand ducats for an infant girl—what think you of that ?”

“A thousand ducats !”

“Ay, a thousand ducats. Will you join me, and share ?”

“How are they to be earned ?”

“Listen. My wife Margaret thinks I have been dead for years, as did you. I have discovered that she takes children in to nurse. She has one now, an infant girl” (and here he sunk his voice to an ominous whisper), “worth a thousand ducats.”

“A thousand ducats !—but how ?”

“A wealthy nobleman has offered me a thousand ducats to procure him a female child. His carriage is now without the village ; in a few minutes he will drive through. I shall hand him the child, and go to seek my reward whenever it pleases me. I want your help—at least I may want it ; and I offer you a share. What say you ?”

"A thousand ducats—a share! 'Tis tempting, certainly, to a poor devil like me. But steal a child! The child will not be injured?"

"No."

"I am with you, and will meet you anon."

So saying, Victor Sanson went out.

"Look here, my friend," the other cried after him; "mind you keep your tongue between your teeth, or—you know Hubert Malissey," he said, in a low, threatening tone.

When Sanson had left, he looked around the room. His eye fell on a cradle in one corner. Advancing to it, he drew back the curtain. An infant lay asleep, sleeping the calm sleep of innocence—a sleep which for many years had not visited Hubert Malissey.

"Ha, the very thing. I was not wrongly informed, then. Hubert, my boy, you have this day earned a thousand ducats."

He was preparing to lift the infant from the cradle, when a step alarmed him. He went back into the centre of the room, and the next moment a woman hurriedly entered. She started on seeing him, and seemed as though she could scarce believe her eyes.

"Well, woman, do you know me?" he growled.

"Know you? Great God! it cannot be—"

"It is, though."

"Hubert!"

"Yes—your husband. Come," he said, with a loud laugh, and flinging himself into a chair, "why do you not welcome me back?"

The woman seemed stunned by the sudden shock.

"I thought you were dead—four years ago," she gasped presently.

"But I'm not, you see."

"They told me you had been shot by French soldiers."

"I was shot, and left for dead ; but, as you see, I am not dead, and here I am. Come, I am hungry and thirsty ; give me food and wine, then we will proceed to business."

The woman obeyed, and proceeded to spread the table, stealing ever and anon a frightened, distrustful look at her husband, but saying not a word.

Hubert Malissey, having satisfied his appetite and quenched his thirst, turned round his chair and faced her.

"And now, Margaret, most amiable wife, you want to know, I dare say, what brings me here. You think, doubtless, 'tis not love for you."

"You never showed me any," she said, with a shudder.

"You never deserved any. But to business. They tell me that you have taken to nursing other people's children. How many have you now?"

"But one. Why do you ask?"

"Because I want the best—the one most suitable to my purpose. Ha, ha! how you look ! I don't mean the fattest ; I'm not an ogre, and going to eat it. Oh, no ; I will put the sweet babe to better use."

"In Heaven's name, Hubert, what mean you?"

"Mean ! I mean that I want yonder infant asleep in the cradle, and mean to have it—that's all."

"The child ! Unfeeling man, you jest," she cried. "The infant child of Miriam !"

"No, I don't jest, as I'll let you know. That child is worth a thousand ducats ; so you and Miriam, whoever she may be, must put up with the loss."

As he spoke, he moved towards the cradle ; but with a cry the woman ran between the child and him.

"No, no ; you shall not touch the child !"

He seized her by the arm, and, exerting his great strength, hurled her away.

"Listen, woman, nor dare to thwart me—"

She stood motionless, looking with terror on him.

"Your own child, where is he—our child ?"

"Claude ? Safe in the inner room," she said, looking over her shoulder.

"Ha ! you think he is safe, do you ? Listen to me. You hope to train up your child in your own humdrum way, do you ? Educate him, you call it, don't you ?" he added sneeringly. "Dare to cross me, and I, his father, will bring him up—educate him."

"You ! No, no—Heaven forbid !" she cried in horror.

"Ay, I myself, his father, will train him up to be a vagabond, a bandit, a villain like myself. So beware, woman !"

Margaret turned deadly pale, and gasped for breath. Hubert moved slowly towards the cradle.



"Yes, train him up to be a man of violence and blood—a thief, a robber, a murderer—till at last he shall end his days on the scaffold! So once again, woman, beware!"

At that moment the sound of wheels was heard, as a carriage drove down the street. Hubert hastily took up the infant, and wrapped it in his cloak. Margaret rushed towards him with a shriek, but he warned her off; and she, poor woman, terrified at his terrible words, and still more terrible look, did not dare attempt to prevent him.

The road ran past one side of the cottage. Large windows descended nearly to the ground, and were now open. The carriage stopped, and stepping out through these open windows, Hubert handed the child to a richly-dressed gentleman within. Then the vehicle drove off at a rapid pace, and Hubert, reëntering the cottage, addressed Margaret, who was weeping and wringing her hands with grief.

"Woman, remember my words. I go now. Dare to breathe to a soul who took away the child, and your life is forfeit. And not only your life—that is not all. Rest assured I will keep my promise with regard to the boy. Remember!"

Then he hurriedly left, and Margaret was alone with her misery.

"What shall I say to the poor mother? What shall I say to Miriam, when she comes to demand her child of me? Wretch that I am, I should have defended her with my life!"

She threw herself in a chair, and, burying her face in her hands, sobbed bitterly. Poor woman!

her sense of duty, her compassion for the feelings of the poor mother when her loss should be known, and her own love for the child, overwhelmed her with grief.

---

## CHAPTER II.

### THE MURDER OF MARGARET D'ARBEL.

MARGARET D'ARBEL sat thus engrossed in her sorrow, and heard not the entry of another.

"Margaret, Margaret ! what ails you ? Are you ill ?"

"Not ill, Miriam," said the poor woman ; "not ill, but very miserable."

"Miserable ! Why so ? I left you happy enough. Come, cheer up ; drive away these gloomy fits of depression, and tell me of my child—my darling Naomi."

"Naomi ! ah !"

A bitter pang shot through Margaret's heart. How could she tell the fond mother that her child had been stolen ?

"Is any thing the matter ?" cried Miriam, in sudden terror. "The child—my child—she is not ill ?"

"She is not ill," said Margaret, forcing the words with difficulty from her lips.

"Ah !" cried the mother joyously ; "I breathe again. Come, Margaret, where is the child ? I long to embrace her."

Miriam advanced towards the cradle ; but Mar-

garet, full of terror, and unwilling she should suddenly learn the truth, held her back.

"Ah, I see," said the mother smiling; "she sleeps, and you are unwilling I should disturb her. But fear not; I will press my lips lightly—so lightly, as only a mother can—on her brow. Come, good Margaret; let me kiss my child."

In spite of all Margaret's efforts, she passed by, and drew back the curtain of the cradle.

A cry of dismay broke from her.

"Gone! What does this mean, Margaret?"

But Margaret was totally unable to reply.

"Ah, I see," said the Jewish mother, a light seeming to break in upon her; "you have her in your own room. I will run there to my darling."

Then she hastened up a flight of stairs to seek her child.

"Angels of heaven," muttered poor Margaret, "what can I do? what shall I do? How can I tell her that her child is gone? Naomi is her sole thought night and day; and when I tell her that Naomi is gone, her heart will break."

She glanced towards the cradle. Near it hung some of the lost child's tiny clothes.

"Ah!" cried Margaret, starting up; "I must remove these; she must not see them. I must break the news to her gently."

Then she commenced removing the clothes, and was so occupied when the Jewess returned, looking very pale, and now seriously alarmed.

"Margaret, for Heaven's sake, tell me of my

child—my Naomi!" she cried distractedly. "Do not longer tease me."

Then her eyes fell on the little clothes which the poor nurse was trying to conceal.

"Ah!" she screamed, darting at them. "Something terrible has happened. Speak! A deadly chill is at my heart. Naomi! She is dead!"

"No, no—not dead!" gasped Margaret; "not dead!"

"Where, then, is she? Speak, woman!"

Miriam grasped her by the arm so forcibly, that she cried out with pain.

"No, no; she is not dead, not dead, but—"

"But what? Speak!"

"Lost! Lost for ever!"

A piercing scream burst from the lips of the mother, while Margaret buried her face in her hands, and sobbed convulsively.

The bereaved mother ran to her, and grasping her by the arm, shook her, demanding, in fierce accents:

"My child—my child—my Naomi! Woman, give me my child!"

"Mercy—mercy! I cannot; it is stolen."

"Stolen! by your connivance! Wicked woman, where is my child—my Naomi?" she shrieked.

"Spare me! Spare me, Miriam! I cannot give her to you. She is stolen from me."

"Stolen! By whom?"

"Ah!"

That was all Margaret answered; and turning deadly pale, she pressed her hand to her heart. She

dared not answer, for she remembered Hubert's terrible words—his devilish threats—respecting her own son Claude.

At this moment, and while the two women were standing face to face—Miriam with gleaming eyes, trembling with passion, like an angry tigress; Margaret shrinking and cowering before the angry gaze of the mother robbed of her young—there entered the cottage a man past the middle age, dressed in the gaberdine and cap then almost universally worn by the Jews.

"Miriam," he said slowly, "what means this turmoil? It is, methinks, a strange greeting."

"Reuben! Oh, accursed be this day! The child—our child—our darling Naomi!"

"The child—Naomi—what of her? She is not dead?"

"Not dead. O God! not dead, but lost to us for ever."

And then the poor mother threw herself into a chair, and sobbed as though her heart would break.

The grief of Reuben, though it did not find vent in tears and sobs, was no less than that of his wife.

"Woman," he said, in a trembling voice, "what mean you? Speak; explain yourself."

"Pardon me—have pity on me; I could not help it!" gasped Margaret, between the sobs which shook her frame. "A man came and took away your child."

"A man! and you suffered him to do so? You should have given your life to defend your charge, accursed woman!"

"Curse me not, good Reuben ; curse me not, for pity's sake !"

"Where did this man go ?—who was he ?"

"He handed the child to a man in a carriage, which drove off instantly."

"And you suffered him to do so ? Who was this man ?—do you know him ?"

No answer.

"Ah ! your hesitation condemns you. You know the robber of my child !"

Margaret fell on her knees before him, and hid her face.

"Speak, woman !"

"I dare not," she murmured.

"Dare not ! And yet you dare to tell me, whom you have suffered to be robbed, that you *dare* not ! Woman, answer me, or, as sure as Jehovah reigns in heaven, thou diest !"

"I cannot—dare not !"

"Answer !" cried Miriam, now also approaching her threateningly. "Answer ! Who stole my child ?"

"No, no ; I cannot—will not !" sobbed Margaret.

Reuben advanced to her, and, furious with grief at the loss of his darling Naomi, uplifted his staff, as though to strike her down. But Miriam seized his arm, and stayed the threatened blow.

"Let me deal with her," said the Jewess. "I will wring the secret from her breast. Woman,"—to Margaret,—"*accursed woman ! dare not to trifle with a mother's feelings. My child ! who has stolen*

my child? Speak; or I will invoke on thee the curse of the Most High."

But Margaret spoke not.

"You will not? Then listen, whilst I curse thee!"

"Yes, yes; I will speak, I will tell all. God will forgive and protect me and my boy," she cried frantically. "Listen; I will tell you. I saw and noted the arms on the carriage. The man who carried off the child—"

Suddenly there rang forth the sharp report of a pistol or carbine. Margaret gave a piercing shriek, and placed her hand to her side. Miriam caught her as she was falling, and supported her to a chair.

The blood was pouring from a wound in the left side of the chest. Her words had been cut short by the assassin's hand; and Miriam was not destined to hear who had stolen her child.

Reuben rushed to the window; but the assassin, whoever he was, had vanished. Then he proceeded to cry "Murder!" and alarm the village. In a very short time the cottage of Margaret d'Arbel was crowded by the horrified villagers.

No aid could be rendered, however, for the wound was fatal; and in five minutes she sank into the sleep of death, bearing with her the secret which had cost her her life.

END OF PROLOGUE.



## CHAPTER I.

## THE PROPHECY.

WE must now beg the reader's permission to change the scene and date. Sixteen years have passed ; and, leaving the village at the foot of the Alps, we will transport ourselves to the city of Genoa.

A considerable crowd may be seen walking in procession through the streets, carrying flags and banners. It is evidently some fête-day or religious festival, for all the members of this procession are dressed in their best clothes ; the twinkling of guitars and the shrill melody of the Italian flute forming a pleasant accompaniment to the merry voices of the townspeople.

Arrived at an open space or square, in the centre of which is an equestrian statue, the people halt, the procession breaks up ; and, standing or sitting carelessly about, all give themselves up to desultory gossip.

Let us listen to the conversation with which one of the many groups is occupied.

The eyes of the people composing this group are directed to a house in the extreme corner of the square. The windows of this dwelling are all closed, and the shutters up ; and for all that can be seen, it appears uninhabited.

But such is not the case ; for, listening to the talk of the people, we learn that it is inhabited by one known as Rudiga the Sorceress, or the *Woman in Red*, as she is called. An animated discussion is

going on, as to whether this woman be indeed invested with the power of diving into futurity and practising unholy arts, or whether she is, as some think, but a clever impostor.

There are not many among the people who favour the latter view ; but there are three men especially who vindicate the idea, and maintain that the so-called sorceress is but a clever charlatan. These three are known as Hector Fiaramonte, Bravadura, and Spada. Their characters are, at the best, suspicious ; and they have no ostensible means of living.

In those days there were many such men to be found in Italian towns,—half thieves, half bravoës,—ready for gold to undertake any work, however villanous or dangerous.

If we scrutinise the features of these men, those of two strike us as familiar ; and we recognise in Hector Fiaramonte our old acquaintance Victor Sanson, the manager of strolling players, and in Bravadura, Hubert Malissey, the husband of the murdered Margaret d'Arbel, and the man who stole the infant child of the poor Jewess.

“Talk not to me of sorcerers and witchcraft !” said Bravadura scornfully ; “the woman is a rank impostor. Did she not, a year ago, prophesy that some day I should ride in my carriage ? That day has not come yet.”

“No, my friend ; but it will,” said Hector Fiaramonte.

“The devil it will ! When, my honest friend ?”

“When ?” replied the other, with a loud laugh.

"Why, when you are driven to the place of execution in a government cart."

"And when that day comes for Bravadura, Hector Fiamonte won't be far away."

"Well, well," said another of the crowd, "whether in this case she prophesied truly or not, matters little. That she is indeed a sorceress, I can vouch ; for did she not prophesy the death of the Grand Duke?"

"Yes, when he was lying dangerously ill. Why, the very physicians who attended him knew well he could not recover," said Bravadura. "You must give us a better instance than that, Matteo Puitti, to convince us that this woman can indeed read the future."

"She told me of events that happened years ago in my native village of Castellan, on the other side of the Alps ; she told me the maiden name of my wife Ninon. More, she told me of a murder committed sixteen years ago, whose author was never discovered."

"A murder ! ha ! who was murdered ?" asked Fiamonte.

"A poor woman, named Margaret d'Arbel—"

A sudden exclamation broke from Bravadura, and his swarthy face turned pale.

"Ha ! and did she say who was the murderer, this sorceress of yours ?"

"No ; I asked her, and though I pressed the question, she refused to answer me. 'I know,' she said, 'the name of the murderer, and in due time will speak it ; but not now.' That is all I could elicit from her."

"Ah, bah ! I don't believe a word of it. She imposes on the weak and ignorant by her outlandish dress, and by the mystery which surrounds her. I'll bet a ducat, that if we could see the inside of this dismal house of hers, it would prove much like any other."

It was Hector Fiamonte who spoke ; and to his words Bravadura replied :

"What say you, my friend, if we have a peep ? You mount on my shoulders, and you can then look through the chink at the top of the shutter."

"Be not so rash," said Matteo Puitti. "'Tis a terrible woman ; and if you anger her, she will assuredly cast a spell upon you."

"A pest upon her spells !" said Fiamonte. "Come, Bravadura, let me get upon your back. I'll have a peep, if it costs me my eyes."

Then Bravadura stood up against the door of the mysterious house, and the other proceeded to mount his shoulders. But before he could mount, an unexpected interruption took place : the door was thrown open, and on the threshold appeared the Woman in Red. She advanced with slow and solemn steps, the crowd falling back in dismay before her.

Her appearance was well calculated to strike the ignorant with awe. She was a tall woman, past the middle age, with the remnants of great beauty on her stern, hard features. Her complexion was dark and swarthy, and she wore on her head a turban of coloured silk, in the fashion of Eastern women. Her dress was entirely of red ; and she

wore many grotesque ornaments, which the vulgar considered to be charms and spells. Even Fiaramonte, who affected to doubt her supernatural powers, fell back before her.

"What would you with me?" she said, fixing a stern and threatening glance on the crowd. "Beware!"

None replied; but a girl timidly advanced, and held out her hand.

"I would have my fortune told," she said.

"Ha!" said the Woman in Red, taking the hand. "You wish to know if your lover will return safely from sea, and when—is it not so?"

"Yes, lady," said the girl, in astonishment; "but how knew you before I asked?"

"I know by the same means by which I am enabled to tell you that your lover will be back ere another moon shall wane."

"And cannot you tell me my fortune?" asked Fiaramonte, with bravado.

Rudiga allowed her eyes to rest on his face for a few moments.

"That face!" she murmured to herself. "I know that face; it seems to me to be like a vision of the past. It recalls to my mind the village of Castellan, and the terrible event which has blasted my life. Ha! now I know. There was a company of strolling players in the village on the day of my loss and the murder of Margaret d'Arbel. One was arrested on suspicion. He had been seen in the cottage of the murdered woman. This is he."

"Come, come," said Hector impatiently. "Cease your mutterings, and tell me my fortune."

"Another time—"

"No, now; or I shall proclaim your art an imposture."

"I must collect my thoughts," she said to herself. "This man may be of use to me in the one object of my life. Perhaps he knows the abductors of my child. His name—his name? The girl Ninon told me. My treacherous memory! Ha! I have it! Victor—Victor—San—Sanson—Victor Sanson."

All this she murmured to herself, holding his hand as though reading therein the lines of fate.

"What is your name?" she asked suddenly.

"My name is one tolerably well known in Genoa, —Hector Fiamonte, gentleman, and soldier of fortune."

"*Alias* bravo and cutthroat."

An exclamation of fury broke from him; while the crowd laughed at his discomfiture.

"The name you have just mentioned is not your name. Your name is"—she lowered her voice and muttered—"Victor Sanson."

"False! It is a lie!"

"The stars do not lie," she said solemnly. "Shall I tell you more? Shall I tell you of sixteen years ago, when, with a company of strolling players, you visited the village of Castellan?—"

"No, no; enough!" exclaimed Fiamonte. "The hand of Satan is in this!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Bravadura, who, though he heard not the words of the Woman in Red, yet saw the effect they produced. "So, Master Hector, the sorceress has been telling you unpleasant things about

the past or the future, has she? Come, good woman, try your art on me. What have you told my friend here?"

"I have told him of the past."

"Well, then, tell me of the future."

He held out his hand, which she took in hers and scrutinised.

"You wish to know of the future?" she said slowly, and fixing her eyes on his face. "You have very little future before you."

"How so?"

"Within a month Satan will have claimed his own."

"Satan?"

"Yes; for within that time you will be *dead*."

"Accursed hag!" he cried furiously, "how dare you threaten me? I have a mind to—"

"You cannot harm me," she interrupted.

"Why? what prevents me?"

"Destiny," she replied solemnly. "It is written in the Book of Fate that you die within a month; I have but read the page."

In spite of his bravado, her words struck deep awe into his soul.

"As to you," she said, turning to Fiamonte, "we shall meet again. The crisis of destiny approaches; I shall have need of you."

Then Rudiga reëntered her house, no one feeling inclined to question her further.

---



## CHAPTER II.

## FRANCESCA AND COUNT CLAUDIO.

SOME of the crowd dispersed, among whom were Bravadura and Spada; but Fiamonte remained.

"He will surely pass this way presently," he said; "nor will *she* be long behind him. I know this is their trysting-place. Count Claudio little thinks that the father of Francesca Donati, instead of being the wealthy noble he is thought, is utterly ruined. 'Twas a singular chance by which I gained the information; I will use it. The young Count has shown me kindness; and bad though I be, gratitude is not yet dead in my breast. He has served me; I will now serve him."

While he was thus thinking, Count Claudio approached; and, halting in the square, looked around, as though expecting some one.

"Count Claudio, a word with you," said Fiamonte, going up to him.

"What now, fellow?" said the Count haughtily. "What would you with me?"

"You do not know me, Count; no matter—I know you. You once did me a kindness; I can now return it."

"Ha! speak on."

"You are waiting here for the Lady Francesca Donati, daughter of the Count and Countess of that name. Am I not right?"

"How knew you my private affairs? This is an impertinence."

"It is not so meant. What I have to say concerns the Count Donati."

"Speak on."

"He is reputed wealthy—is it not so?"

"It is."

"He is a beggar."

"Impossible! He is immensely rich."

"So people think; but they are wrong. Listen to my words, Count Claudio. This morning, the Countess Donati received a letter from Venice, where the Count is; and this letter contained the news that he is utterly ruined, and that his only hope was that she might borrow a hundred and fifty thousand ducats, and remit to him at once. She has endeavoured to do so in several places, and failed."

"A hundred and fifty thousand ducats! The Count utterly ruined! It seems impossible. How know you this, my good fellow?"

"I cannot give my authority, but what I say you may rely upon."

"This is most marvellous," said Count Claudio to himself. "Can it indeed be true? If so, it is most desperately unfortunate. I love Francesca; but I am deeply in debt, and to wed her without the promised dowry would be madness. I dare not; and yet how can I relinquish her?—so lovely and so loving; her gentle heart would break."

Neither Count Claudio nor Fiamonte observed the door of Rudiga's house open, and herself on the threshold. But the people who still remained noticed her, and shrank back, awe-stricken at the terrible looks of the supposed sorceress. She heard all

the conversation relating to the ruin of Count Donati, and more which afterwards passed between Claudio and the other. Then, apparently satisfied, she drew back and closed the door.

While the young Count and Fiamonte were yet conversing, another personage appeared on the scene. This was a lady dressed in black and closely veiled. She advanced to a group standing at some distance from the house, and asked :

"Can you direct me to the abode of one Rudiga, a fortune-teller?"

"The Woman in Red!—the sorceress!" cried several. "Yes, madam,—it is there."

The lady hesitated, as if uncertain whether to advance or not.

"Thus thickly veiled," she muttered to herself, "no one would recognise the Countess Constanza Donati. I must adventure it. 'Tis our last hope. This woman—this sorceress—they say, possesses fabulous wealth. I will bring my diamonds, my jewels, and offer them as security for the money I require. It is a fortunate idea ; and I see in it the means of our salvation. I will hasten for them, and return."

No sooner had she gone, than Fiamonte, who had been intently watching her, and who seemed struck by her voice and appearance, said to Count Claudio :

"Count, know you the purpose of that woman's visit here?"

"Not I," was the careless reply ; "perhaps to have her fortune told."

"No, it is not to have her fortune told, but to borrow money."

"To borrow money? Indeed! And how does that interest me?"

"She comes to borrow 150,000 ducats."

"A large sum, truly; but nothing to me."

"Know you who the lady is?"

"Not I; nor do I care."

"Do not be too sure. It is the Countess Constanza Donati, mother of the Lady Francesca."

"Hah! say you so? Are you sure?"

"Quite."

"And her object?"

"I have told you."

"Can it be so? What means have you of knowing?"

"I cannot tell you; but trust me, I speak truth."

"It is strange, very strange," mused Count Claudio. The fellow has the air of truth."

"See you who comes yonder, across the bridge?" said Fiamonte, interrupting him, and pointing with his finger.

"Ha! 'tis she!—Francesca,—my heart's love!"

"Remember, Count, she's no longer the wealthy heiress, but the daughter of a ruined man."

"Perdition seize the thought; it is madness. I cannot give her up; and yet to wed her would be rank folly. My affairs are now in so bad a state as to make a marriage with a wealthy lady absolutely indispensable."

Such were the muttered thoughts of the young Count Claudio as, torn by conflicting emotions,—

swayed now by his love, now by his interest and the desperate nature of his fortunes,—his mind wandered first one way, then the other. But as the fair Francesca Donati approached, self-interest and expediency melted away, until in the sunshine of her presence he lived but for her.

He hastened to meet her.

“Francesca! dearest, best-beloved! Again I behold you. Your bright beauty has dissipated the gloom which was gathering around. I am again happy.”

“Happy! Have you, then, been otherwise, Claudio?”

“No, no, Francesca; not unhappy;—how could I be so when blessed with your love? But I have heard things which disquieted me concerning your father, Francesca.”

“Ah! I trust nothing is wrong. Do you know, Claudio, that my mother has been all day in a terrible state of excitement. But a short time ago she came to me and asked for my diamond tiara. What can it mean?”

Claudio groaned inwardly.

“It is, then, true,” he thought. “She is about to sell her jewels in order to raise the money.” But not wishing to alarm her, he dissembled his feelings.

“Oh, doubtless it is merely some trifling anxiety, dear Francesca,” he said. “Do not suffer it to trouble you.”

“But it does trouble me, Claudio,” said the young girl. “Do you know, I often think that my dear mother has some secret grief which weighs her

down. Frequently, on looking up suddenly, I notice her regarding me in a mournful manner, her eyes suffused with tears ; and once or twice she has let fall expressions as though she feared to lose me. What can it mean ?”

The eyes and ears of Claudio were so taken up with his fair companion, that he paid but little attention to other objects. And, sooth to say, the fair Francesca might be pleaded as an excuse for any amount of inadvertence to what was passing around.

Seldom even among the daughters of sunny Italy was so perfect a specimen of feminine beauty to be found. Unlike the generality of her countrywomen, she was not dark, but fair. Her hair was of a light-brown colour, her eyes dark blue, her complexion a happy blending of the blonde and brunette, with all the transparency and delicacy of the former, wanting the pallor which so often characterises fair beauties. Her features were faultless in outline, while the expression was so soft and lovable as to double the effect of her great beauty. The type of her face was neither the Grecian nor the Italian style of beauty, but rather a mixture of both, with perhaps the aquiline predominating. However, giving up the task of description as hopeless, we must leave the reader to imagine the graces of her face and form,—the small classic head, bound round with luxuriant masses of hair ; the delicate hands, small feet, gently-swelling bust, and taper waist ; limbs modelled after the antique ; and all the various graces with which Dame Nature had taken delight in adorning her.

Claudio was endeavouring to dispel her melancholy and forebodings, she drinking in his words, which fell like music on her ear, when both were startled by a voice close beside them.

“Lady, your hand, and I will tell your fortune.”

Francesca, turning quickly, gave utterance to a faint cry.

There, close beside her, stood the dreaded sorceress, known as Rudiga, the Woman in Red. Her eyes were bent on the young girl's face with a penetrating glance, which seemed to exercise a strange weird charm.

Francesca shuddered involuntarily; she knew not why.

“Your hand, young lady,” said the reputed sorceress again, while a smile full of strange meaning broke out on her face.

There was something so tender in her words, so melancholy a pathos in the smile which accompanied them, that the girl felt reassured, and, though not without misgiving, extended her little hand to the fortune-teller.

The latter was murmuring to herself words which neither Francesca nor Claudio could understand, never for an instant removing her eyes from her face—those dark flashing eyes, which seemed as though they would read the inmost heart of all upon whom their glance fell.

Let us listen to the murmured thoughts of the Woman in Red.

“The voice of nature is strong within me. I feel an inward conviction that at last I behold my child.

The chain of evidence is not complete, but my heart tells me I am right."

"Come, come," said Claudio, roughly interrupting her; "release the lady's hand. What means this idle mummerly?"

Rudiga removed her eyes from Francesca, and turned her angry gaze on the young Count.

"Rash young man, beware how you offend me."

"What! do you threaten me? Away with you. I fear not your mock spells and enchantments—'tis all imposture, as is thy fortune-telling."

"They call you Count Claudio," she said, "do they not?"

"Call me Count Claudio! What mean you, woman?"

"Do you remember your mother?" she asked abruptly, fixing her eyes on his face.

"My mother? no. She died while I was yet too young. But a truce to this idle folly; begone, woman, or I will have you scourged through the streets."

Rudiga's eyes flashed fire. She dropped the hand of Francesca, and confronted Claudio defiantly.

"Empty-brained coxcomb, you dare to threaten me! Beware! you know not who you are. I know—"

"What know you?"

"More than I choose to say at your bidding. You think yourself nobly born, do you not? I know better; your mother was an honest but poor village woman, and I held her in my arms as she yielded up her life, murdered—"



"Vile impostor, you lie."

"I have bid you beware how you anger me ; again I repeat the warning."

"I defy you and your pretended arts. Come, Francesca, let us leave this mad woman, or I shall be compelled to order her arrest."

Rudiga suddenly clutched Francesca by the arm.

"Stay; you go not so. What would you with this girl? What claim have you on her? The voice of nature is strong within me. I know her mother."

"What raving is this? You know her mother, the Countess Donati? I do not believe it."

"It is false; her mother is not the Countess Donati."

"Unhand the lady, vile wretch," cried Claudio furiously.

"By what right do you dare tell me to do so—me—*me*? Who are you that claim her? Know you who she is?"

Francesca, pale and trembling, was almost ready to faint while this violent scene went on. The populace, too, crowded around, attracted by the altercation between the sorceress and Count Claudio.

Rudiga was rapidly working herself up to a pitch of ungovernable excitement. Instead of releasing Francesca, she held her arm with yet firmer grasp.

"The woman is mad—mad," exclaimed Claudio, trying to drag Francesca away.

"No, no; not mad, rash boy. You know not who she is. See—see—by this token I know her."

Then, as quick as thought, she tore the dress from Francesca's left shoulder, leaving the flesh bare.

A sharp cry, almost a shriek, broke from the Woman in Red.

"I knew it—I knew it—'tis she;" and then, before Francesca, who was dreadfully terrified, could escape, she folded her in a close embrace. "Naomi, Naomi," she cried, "I have found you at last."

Claudio now rushed forward and attempted by force to drag Rudiga away. He succeeded in his object; but in the struggle an ivory cross which Francesca wore around her neck became detached, and remained in the hand of the so-called sorceress. Claudio cried out furiously:

"Sacrilege!—sacrilege! This accursed Jewish sorceress has torn a crucifix from the bosom of a Christian maiden."

Then arose on all sides the cry:

"Sacrilege!—sacrilege! Stone her—drown her—the witch."

And with these words the mob crowded around Rudiga, and she was in imminent danger of her life. But just when her peril seemed most imminent, and even as the foremost of the crowd were aiming blows at her, Francesca rushed forward with a shriek.

"No, no," she cried, "do not harm her. It was an accident; the poor woman did not mean to steal the cross. You shall not harm her. If she must die, I will die with her."

The mob, but a moment before intent on murder, fell back before the magic of Francesca's bright beauty, and Rudiga, the Woman in Red, owed her safety to the Christian maiden.

"'Tis the voice of nature," cried Rudiga. "Naomi, Naomi, come to my arms. You were lost, and are found."

But to Francesca this was quite unintelligible. She had pitied the poor woman, whom she feared to have seen killed before her eyes, and had, therefore, not without risk to herself, saved her from the fury of the mob. But as to the meaning of this strange woman's vehement demonstrations of affection to herself, and her calling her "Naomi," she was in utter ignorance. She could only think her mad, and was glad when she could escape from her embrace, and be escorted home by Claudio.

---

### CHAPTER III.

#### THE ROBBERS BREAK INTO RUDIGA'S HOUSE.

It is night, and Rudiga, the Jewess, the sorceress, is alone in her house—alone communing with her own thoughts, which are of a gloomy and sombre nature. Leaning her cheek on her hand, she has sunk into a deep reverie—so deep that she remains insensible to all external objects, wrapped up in sad memories and visions of the past. She hears not the moaning of the wind, nor any other sound. She hears not, as she thus sits alone and disconsolate, a noise as of the window gently raised; nor does she see a man cautiously enter the room. He must have climbed from without, and, removing the shutter, gained entrance in that way. What can his object be? Rob-

bery—at least probably so ; for we behold in this man our old acquaintance Hubert Malissey, *alias* Bravadura. He is masked, and his footsteps are silent and stealthy as those of a cat as he advances into the room. Scarcely has he entered than he is followed by another man, also masked, and then another, till three stand in the dimly-lighted apartment silent and motionless as spirits.

On our readers behoof we will lift the mask of those other two, and reveal the countenances of Hector Fiamonte and Spada.

The three gaze on the Woman in Red with surprise, mingled with awe. She sees them not. What can it mean? Is she asleep? No, her eyes are open.

While they are wondering and doubting, she raises her head from her hand, and calmly turns her gaze upon them.

“What want you here?” she asks, not in the least dismayed, but in the same cold, hard tones which ever distinguished her voice.

“Ha! ha! that's good. We'll show you what we want. Come, comrades, one of you stand by her while we search. Give a few inches of steel if she attempts to move or raise an outcry.”

It was the bold ruffian Bravadura who spoke ; but Rudiga seemed scarcely to heed his words. Then the other two commenced to search the place.

“The keys—give us your keys,” cried Bravadura, in low threatening tones, as he observed the other two trying in vain to open the lid of a huge wooden chest.

She took a bundle of keys from her girdle, and contemptuously tossed them on the ground.

Then they began their search anew, and proceeded to ransack the wooden chest and all the cupboards and locked places they could find. But their hopes of gold and valuables were doomed to be disappointed.

The sorceress regarded them all the while with a calm and contemptuous glance, as though well aware they would find nothing.

Their unsuccessful search concluded, the trio drew into one corner of the room, and held a whispered conversation.

"You said she was wealthy; the old hag has not a scudi or a scudi's worth in the place."

Thus Bravadura addressed Hector Fiamonte, in low growling tones of intense disgust.

"And so she is—rich as Croesus. I knew her three years ago in Leghorn. She there lent the son of the Grand-Duke of Tuscany half a million ducats in one sum to pay his gambling debts. It was all repaid her with large interest. Besides, has she not lent large sums in this very city? Do I not know that the young Count Claudio is heavily in her debt?"

"Perdition seize it! and yet we cannot find a ducat."

"What is it you require?" asked the Jewess sternly; "what do you seek?"

"What do we seek! Why, money, of course."

"Why did you not say so? Here," then she took a purse from her pocket, and flung the contents

contemptuously on the ground. "There is gold ; take it, and begone."

Bravadura and Spada instantly began scrambling for the money; but Hector Fiamonte folded his arms, and stood aloof with an air of pride and dignity almost laughable.

Rudiga regarded him with curiosity.

"Well, robber," she said, "why do not you too scramble for gold?"

"I care not for such paltry work. As for me, I am a bad fellow doubtless ; but I fly only at high game. Let the common herd content themselves with a few gold pieces. I came to gain at least a thousand ; and as there seems little chance of my succeeding in so doing,"—he shrugged his shoulders,—"**I must rest content without.**"

"Ah!" she cried, rising, as a sudden thought seemed to strike her ; "you seem a likely fellow. Would you like to earn a thousand ducats with but little trouble?"

"Would I?—would I not?"

"Are you to be trusted?"

"Try me."

"I have a great mind to."

She advanced towards him as she spoke, and taking him unawares, suddenly made a snatch at the black-velvet mask he wore.

"Let me see your face."

He attempted to prevent her, but was too late.

The other two robbers rushed forward with drawn knives.

"Betrayed ! betrayed ! she has seen the face of

one of us, and must die," said Bravadura, raising his hand, and attempting to reach the Jewess.

"Hold ! hold !" cried Fiaramonte ; " I have business with her. I do not mind my face being seen ; were it as ugly as yours, I might."

" Begone," said the Jewess, pointing to the window. " Take your gold, and go ; I have business with this man. Fear not ; I shall not trouble after you."

The two villains retired grumbling, and made their escape by the same way as they came.

" Your name ?" asked Rudiga, so soon as they were again alone.

" Hector Fiaramonte."

She looked him hard in the face.

" False !" she said ; " it is Victor Sanson."

" Ah !" he cried ; " how know you that ?"

She pointed above with her finger.

" The stars, which never lie."

" I have not borne the name for fifteen years," he muttered half to himself.

" I know it. Do you remember sixteen years ago, on the 24th of June, in the village of Castellan ?"

" I do."

" Do you remember a crime you committed on that day ?"

" Who are you who tell me these things ? How know you this ?"

" No matter who I am ; I know. Do you remember that on that day a poor Jewish woman was robbed of her child, and the woman who had charge of the child murdered ?"

Great drops of perspiration rolled down his forehead, and he turned deadly pale.

"I remember," he said; "but do the stars tell you I committed the murder?"

"They do not."

"Ah, I breathe again."

"But you know who did the deed."

He was silent.

"What became of the child?"

"I know not, so help me, Heaven."

"You know not! And had you never thought of the poor mother's feelings thus bereaved? Had you never thought on the enormity of the crime?"

"Listen to me, mysterious woman; I will tell the truth. I was offered a share in five hundred ducats to procure a female child of between eight and nine months old. I was told the infant would be adopted by a noble lady, and reared in the lap of luxury. I was poor, and consented; but since that time I have repented often. That alone of all my misdeeds weighs down my soul with remorse."

"And you wish to earn a thousand ducats?"

"Do I not, considering that I have not five scudi in my purse?"

"And would you also repair the wrong you have done at the same time as you earned this money?"

"I would."

"Listen to me: you say you know not what has become of the child which was stolen on the day of Margaret d'Arbel's murder?"

"I have not the least idea."

"I have; I know where the girl is now."



"The devil you do !" said Hector carelessly.  
"Well, what do you wish me to do ?"

"I wish you to repair the wrong you have done. Carry her off from her supposed mother, and restore her to the real one."

"*Capo di Bacco !*" said Fiaramonte, twirling his moustache ; "the affair is simple, and suits me exactly. It is not the first time I have carried off young girls, for other purposes than to restore them to their mothers."

"You are willing to undertake it, then ?"

"What, for a thousand ducats ? Ay, I'll carry off half a dozen girls for less money. What is the girl's name, and who is her supposed mother ?"

"She is called Francesca Donati ; and her false mother is the Countess of that name."

"What, the lady Francesca, the betrothed of Count Claudio !" he exclaimed in surprise.

"The same ; but he shall never wed her."

"You would not separate them ?"

"Would I not ! Perish the thought that *he* should ever call her his. You accept the offer ?"

He paused for some time ere replying.

"Listen," he said presently. "I am a rascal, it is true, but not so black a one as some might think. The young Count Claudio has been kind to me ; I would rather perish on the scaffold than harm him in person or spirit. He loves this girl Francesca Donati—loves her passionately, fondly, madly. I will not thwart his love, though I lose a thousand ducats."

"Listen, man," she cried with earnestness, and

grasping his arm. "You are poor ; I offer you money, easily earned, merely for doing a good action, and retrieving the wrong you have already done. I will double the sum—two thousand ducats."

Fiaramonte folded his arms, and replied stoically :

"I will not do aught to harm Count Claudio."

"Five thousand ducats !" she almost shrieked.

"I am a poor fellow, and a vagabond, it is true ; but I have a heart ; and though it cost me five thousand ducats, I will not aid in thwarting Count Claudio in his love. It is an expensive luxury, I grant ; but in refusing this money, my conscience tells me I am doing a good, a noble action. I love Count Claudio, and will risk death in his service. Madame, I wish you good night."

Then Fiaramonte bowed like a hero of tragedy, strode to the door, opened it, and went out.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Baffled again," murmured the Woman in Red when he had left. "I will see what fate has in store. The cards—the stars with which I blind the credulous multitude—*sometimes* tell the truth."

Then she took a pack of cards, and, spreading them on the ground, proceeded to read them.

"Ha !" she exclaimed, rising, after a brief manipulation ; "the cards tell me that the first person who enters this house shall restore me my daughter. I will wait and see."

## CHAPTER IV.

## THE VEILED LADY.

RUDIGA seated herself, and looked around the apartment. Whether from taste or to foster the superstitious ideas of the people, her house was fitted up in grotesque, even repulsive manner.

Skulls grinned from the walls; stuffed reptiles, owls, and birds looked down with their sightless eyes from all sides. The shelves around were filled with large books, strange-looking apparatus, bottles, and mysterious objects, of which the use could not even be guessed by the uninitiated.

The apartment was lighted by a lurid flame, which, itself invisible, cast a demoniacal glare on the massive furniture and on the queer belongings. Two large iron safes or caskets stood on stands, each by the side of a pillar, to which they were chained. These were reputed to contain vast sums of money, and to the uninitiated appeared to be formed of solid blocks of iron—to have no door or opening whatever. But the mysterious mistress of this place could, with a simple touch of the fingers, cause the invisible windows to fly open, revealing the treasures concealed within.

The Woman in Red glanced bitterly around.

“And they call me sorceress,” she muttered to herself, “because, by my skill and deep designing, I know so much of the private history of most Genoese families as to be able to tell them of the past, and

form drew ideas of the future. And yet, all-powerful as they think me, my heart is desolate. I have discovered my daughter, my long-lost Naomi; I am powerless to reclaim her; nay, despite her gentleness, she shrinks from me with aversion—from *me*, her mother—and clings to that prating coxcomb who dared insult me. O Naomi, Naomi! why have I found you, only to see without the power to clasp you in my arms, to call you mine—— Hark! a knock! Some one comes to consult the fortune-teller.”

It was indeed a continued rapping at the outer door which had disturbed her. She arose, and, touching a spring on one of the pillars, the door flew open.

A lady, dressed in black and closely veiled, entered, and stood before her. The sorceress had reseated herself, and gazed fixedly at the new-comer.

“What would you with me, lady?” she asked; “your fortune told? or wouldst hear of your past life?”

Rudiga’s penetrating glance discerned, attached to a gold chain, a jewelled watch, engraved on the back with the arms of the Donati family. One glance was enough, and she knew her visitor.

“So, so!” she thought; “the Countess Constanza Donati,—the woman who has robbed me of my child. What wants she—money? She shall have it; but only at my price.”

“I want not to have my fortune told. I am not so credulous as the weak multitude.”

"What want you, then, with me, Countess Donstanza Donati?"

"Ha! how knew you my name?"

"By the same art which you despise. I know not only your name, but your object in visiting me—in one word, *money*."

"This woman's knowledge is marvellous! Is it possible there is indeed something in her art, and that she can read both the past and the future?"

"And supposing such were my object?" she asked aloud.

"Money! That would depend on what you offered me in return, Countess. I have money—a vast treasure. See!"

She touched a spring, and instantly the iron door of one of the safes flew open, revealing a great number of caskets, bags, and iron-bound boxes.

"Approach, and view them," she said.

The Countess did so; and as Rudiga threw them open, her astonished gaze rested on piles of gold and heaps of flashing jewelry.

"This casket contains one million ducats in gold and silver, and the value of two millions more in jewels. See, there is yet another; that contains an equal treasure."

The Countess clasped her hands, and gazed with astonishment at such vast wealth.

"Ah! then you can aid me. I require what is to you but a small sum."

"I know," interrupted the Woman in Red; "you require one hundred and fifty thousand ducats."

"Great Heavens!" said the Countess, aghast with horror; "how knew you this? How can you tell my inmost thoughts?"

"By that art which you despise," said the other solemnly. "And now I will tell you for what purpose you require the money. Your husband, the Count Donati, writes that unless such a sum can be procured immediately, he is utterly ruined."

"Ah! you know all," cried the Countess in terror. "This is truly dreadful."

"I know all that you know—and more. Listen while I tell you. Not only will the Count be utterly ruined if he do not receive the money, but he will be disgraced, dishonoured, and his liberty—probably his life also—pay the forfeit."

"O Heavens!" cried the Countess; "can it indeed be so?"

"It is so."

"You can aid me," she cried imploringly; "you can save me. Do so; and I shall be for ever grateful."

"Grateful!" said the sorceress scornfully; "will gratitude give me back my gold?"

"I will pay you liberally for the loan when I return it."

"When you return it! That may be never."

"I have my jewels with me, and my daughter's."

"Your *daughter's*, Countess Donati! You said your daughter, I think?"

The piercing eyes of the sorceress were on her face, as though to read her inmost soul.

The Countess quailed before her, unable to meet that fiery, searching glance.

"I have my jewels," she said, in humbler tones ; for now she was thoroughly terrified at the deep knowledge this woman possessed of her affairs.

"They will not suffice."

"They are worth more than a hundred thousand ducats."

"That may be ; but they are not worth a hundred and fifty thousand, and a less sum is to you useless."

"True, too true, alas !" cried the Countess. "What can I do ? Woman, have you no pity ? You know all, and yet refuse to aid me."

"Pity, Countess Constanza Donati ! Is it you who talk to me of pity ? Have you any pity on the mother *whom you have robbed of her child ?*"

"I robbed a mother of her child !" gasped the Countess, turning deadly pale. "What mean you ? I understand you not."

"You understand me well, Countess Donati. Your daughter—your daughter, whom you call Francesca—"

"My daughter ! what of her ? What of my dear Francesca ?"

"This : your daughter—is—NOT YOUR DAUGHTER."

The Woman in Red rose as she spoke these words, and stood before the unfortunate lady like an avenging angel. Again she repeated the words, almost shrieking them forth :

"YOUR DAUGHTER IS NOT YOUR DAUGHTER !"

## CHAPTER V.

## THE COUNTESS IMPRISONED.

THE Countess by an effort recovered her self-possession, and, though pale as death and trembling, arose.

"It is false, audacious impostor. How dare you cast a slight on the honour of our noble family? How dare you, vile sorceress, thus insult me? I will have you flogged through the town at the cart's tail."

"Will you? Indeed, you forget, Countess Donati, that it is I, not you, who command here."

"Would you dare detain me by force?"

"Would I dare? Ha, ha, ha! assuredly I would, my proud lady; so you had best listen to me quietly."

The Countess glanced around the room. There appeared no possibility of escape; for the door by which she entered had again closed behind her, and she could not discern either lock or handle.

She gazed despairingly around the room, but saw no chance of escape. Then she again turned to Rudiga, and said:

"Mysterious woman! I know not the secret of your knowledge. You have this day told me secrets which I thought hidden deep in my own breast. Listen: I will tell you more, if you do not already know.

"The stars never lie," said Rudiga solemnly.



"Speak on ; I can test the truth of what you say by the sleepless sentinels of night."

"More than sixteen years ago a violent shock brought on brain-fever ; and while thus lying delirious, my infant daughter died. Slowly I regained my consciousness and reason. My first cry was for my child. The physicians saw that should I learn the dreadful truth—that my infant daughter was dead—it would also cause my death. My husband procured a female child of the same age as mine ; and one morning I woke and found Francesca nestling in my bosom. For years my kind husband kept the secret ; and it was not till the child was six years of age that he revealed to me the fraud. But then the tender vine had wound herself so closely round my heart, that had she indeed been my daughter, I could not have loved her more."

"And you thought not, selfish woman, of the poor mother's anguish from whom the child was torn."

"I knew nothing on the subject."

"Then know now that the child you call Francesca was stolen from her cradle during the absence of the poor fond mother, and that the nurse, who would have revealed the name of the abductor, was murdered—shot dead—ere the words could pass her lips."

"Alas, I knew it not!"

"Are you prepared to make restitution?"

"Restitution!"

"Yes."

"What can I do?" answered the Countess, evading the question. "Good woman, I have told you

all. About this money,—this hundred and fifty thousand ducats,—will you lend it to me ?”

“On conditions.”

“What conditions ?”

“That you give up the girl you falsely call your daughter.”

“To whom ?”

“To her mother.”

“I know her not.”

“I will find her. Answer, will you give up the girl ?”

“Never !” shrieked the Countess.

“You shall be compelled to do so ; the law will compel you.”

“I will deny it. You have no proof, no witness.”

“Woman, will you give up the girl whom you have stolen ?”

“Never—never—never !”

“Then, by Heaven, you shall never leave this room alive,” cried the sorceress, now wound up to a pitch of fury.

The Countess ran frantically to the door. In vain ; it was bolted and barred, nor could she discover where the fastenings were. The windows were far above her reach, and she was soon convinced that for the present she was safely caged.

Rudiga regarded her in silence, knowing how vain her attempts to escape would prove.

So soon as the imprisoned lady was satisfied that all her efforts must prove vain, she desisted, and turned with the intention of beseeching the Woman in Red to release her.

But, to her dismay, the Jewess had vanished, and she was alone—immured in the dismal old house of the sorceress.

---

## CHAPTER VI.

### THE PALACE DONATI.

IN one of the sumptuous saloons of the Palace Donati, a fair young girl wandered restlessly up and down, ever and anon casting anxious glances through the large open window which looked out on the courtyard. A sweet, pale-faced, fair-haired girl of some eighteen or nineteen summers, the look of anxiety and grief on her features made her yet more interesting. Dressed in pale-blue satin, her luxuriant light hair flowing loosely over her white shoulders, she looked a pale and delicate lily—a being too fragile for earth.

“My mother, my dear mother! where can she be?” the young girl murmured. “She went out five hours ago, saying she would be back very soon. It wants now but an hour of midnight. Surely nothing can have happened? Her manner when she left was strange, and there was a wild light in her eye which alarmed me. This morning she received a letter from the Count my father. I fear it contained bad news, for from the moment of reading she has been oppressed with a heavy grief. God grant no harm has befallen her!”

Thus musing, the young girl touched a small silver bell, and a waiting-maid quickly appeared.

"Ninon, I am alarmed about the Countess my mother ; where can she be ? Did she go out in the carriage ?"

"No, Signorita ; her ladyship went out on foot, and would not even allow one of the servants to accompany her. She said she would not be more than an hour at the outside."

"That will do, Ninon. Leave me ; I would be alone."

Francesca went out on the balcony, and leaning her chin on her hand, gazed anxiously and sadly out on the great gate of the courtyard, through which the Countess had gone out.

She remained thus for half an hour, silent and motionless as a fair statue, when again the girl Ninon appeared.

"Signorita, there is a man below who desires speech of you ; a strange-looking man, wearing a sword, and with a swaggering gait. I like not his appearance."

"His name ?"

"Hector Fiaramonte, he says."

"I never heard the name. I know him not. What can he want with me ?"

"Shall I dismiss him, Signorita ?"

"Yes. I will not see a stranger."

The girl was about departing, but she called her back.

"Stay ; I will see him."

The servant looked wonderingly at her young lady, at a loss to account for her sudden change of purpose.

"Perchance he has news of the Countess my mother. Send him up."

The girl obeyed; and in a short space ushered in Hector Fiamonte, soldier of fortune, as he chose to style himself, with whom the reader is already acquainted.

The fair young girl regarded him curiously, half in wonder, half in fear. And, indeed, there was some reason for a delicately-nurtured young lady to look askance on the reckless bravo he appeared.

"Well, sir," she faltered, "what would you with me?"

He looked round at the girl Ninon, who remained in the saloon, as though not thinking it safe to leave her young lady alone with so questionable a character.

"What I have to say I must say alone."

"Ninon, leave me."

"Signorita, consider; this person—this gentleman—is a stranger," urged the girl.

"No matter," said Francesca decisively, "I will hear what he has to say."

Ninon then withdrew, and Hector, looking around the room, approached the young lady with a mysterious air.

"Speak, sir. Have you news of my mother?"

"It concerns her, yourself, and another."

"Another! Who?"

"Count Claudio."

A deep blush suffused the girl's face as she heard the name.

"Ha! What of the Count?"

"I will tell you anon ; but first I will speak of yourself."

"Proceed," said Francesca, agitated by a strange emotion.

"Well, then, lady, first of yourself. You are in danger."

"In danger ! How ?"

"You have an enemy."

"An enemy ? I, who have never injured any one ?"

"Yes, an enemy ; and yet not an enemy."

"You speak in riddles, sir ; I understand you not."

"I have this day been offered money to carry you off by force."

A flush of indignation and anger mounted to the girl's cheeks at these words.

"Carry me off by force ! Who dare attempt such a deed ? Not—not—"

She hesitated, and he completed the sentence for her.

"Not Count Claudio, you would say, lady. No ; it is not Count Claudio."

"Who, then, is it ? Deal no longer in riddles."

"Rudiga, the Jewess, the Woman in Red. She says that the Countess Donati is not your mother, and that she will restore you to your real mother. Moreover, she offered me money to abduct you, and swore a bitter oath that Count Claudio shall never wed you. She is to be feared, for she has the power of gold."

"What knows she of Count Claudio ? What

enmity has she against him?—and why is she thus vindictive? The woman must be mad.”

“There is method in her madness, lady. Trust me, she is to be feared,—a terrible woman.”

“What is your motive in coming to me with this strange tale?”

“Lady, I may be a bad man—a violent man, but I am a man of honour.” Here he laid his hand on his heart and struck an attitude. “But my worst enemy can never say that Hector Fiamonte is an ungrateful man. Count Claudio once did me a service, and my sword, my life, is always at his service.”

Francesca looked with surprise on the singular-looking bravo, who, despite of his rascally profession, enunciated so generous a sentiment.

“What are you, sir?”

“A soldier of fortune, whose sword is at the command of any who can pay, and at the service of Count Claudio or yourself free of all reward.”

Francesca was about to speak again, when a third person appeared on the scene.

“I have been an accidental listener to a conversation, my man, and having heard so much, I must hear more.”

And with these words the young Count Claudio himself stepped forward and stood before the bravo and the girl.

“Claudio,” cried Francesca, running up to him, “I am so glad you have come. I am in terrible grief. My mother has gone out, I know not whither, and now this good man comes and fills my soul with dread by his dark speeches.”

"This must be unravelled. Passing by, I saw a light in the saloon, and knowing thereby that you had not retired to rest, I entered, and, unnoticed by the servant, made my way here. The sound of voices attracted my attention, and the mention of my own name caused me to pause on the threshold and listen. I heard the latter part of what passed ; and now," turning to Hector, "you please speak plainly, for I will not suffer this young lady to be alarmed with idle tales. Come, sir, speak."

Count Claudio addressed him in haughty tones, as was his wont ; for there was not a more fiery and hot-blooded young noble in Italy.

"Have patience, most noble Count ; your hasty words shall not anger me ; for you once did me a service—a great service—and Hector Fiamonte is no ingrate."

"You said something of that when I saw you before to-day, and you told me the extravagant tale you did about the Count Donati."

"The Count Donati—my father !" cried Francesca. "What of him."

"I will tell you another time, dearest," said Claudio hastily ; for the subject of the supposed utter ruin of her father was a delicate one.

"What I told you of the Count Donati was true as gospel. Ere to-morrow's sun goes down, my words will have been proved."

"Confound this fellow !" muttered Claudio to himself ; "he seems confident. Can it be that there are grounds for what he avers? What reason can he have for deceiving me? I will question him."



Now, sir, speak plainly, and say what you have to say."

"What I have to say is said in few words. I have already told this lady that she is in great danger; that one who is to be dreaded purposes carrying her off, and, backed by the terrible power of gold, will succeed, if not guarded against."

"Who is this terrible person?"

"Rudiga, the sorceress and money-lender—the Jewess—the Woman in Red."

"The Woman in Red! Power of gold! Why, she barely earns a livelihood by telling fools their fortunes."

"Believe it not, Count Claudio; the Jewess is enormously rich. She offered me and some friends of mine five thousand ducats to carry off this lady."

"And you refused?"

"Hector Fiaramonte is a man of honour; you did me a service, and are interested in this lady. Boundless wealth shall not tempt me to injure you, nor shall the direst tortures. Hector Fiaramonte is one who never forgives an injury or forgets a benefit."

"On my soul," said Count Claudio, "I believe you are an honest fellow. Here is my hand."

The bravo took it.

"Now you speak like Count Claudio; my sword is yours."

At this moment a small clock chimed the midnight hour.

"O Claudio, 'tis midnight; where can my mother be?"

"The Countess Donati was seen some hours ago in the vicinity of the house of Rudiga the Jewess."

"Ha! that woman again. Can it be that she has sought her out? This fellow says she is wealthy; perchance, if there is truth in his tale, the Countess has gone to borrow a sum of money. Something may have befallen her. Francesca dearest, I will leave you. I will search all Genoa till I find your mother. Adieu!"

"Count, may I accompany you? The streets of Genoa are infested by lawless characters by night."

"Yes, my good fellow; I believe you are honest; and a strong arm and good sword are not to be despised."

Claudio kissed Francesca's hand. Hector Fiaramonte made a deep obeisance, and then both hurried away, leaving the young girl again alone.

"A strange foreboding of evil is on my soul," she murmured. "The strange words of that man have filled me with alarm. The Woman in Red says that I am not the daughter of the Countess Donati. Can it be true?"

---

## CHAPTER VII.

### THE COUNTESS RECEIVES A WARNING.

THE streets of Genoa are all but deserted; for it is close upon the midnight hour. A few tipsy revellers may be seen wending their unsteady way home; and occasionally a cloaked form stealing along in the shadows of the houses with cat-like

quickness. These are the sons of darkness—bravoës, cutthroats, and vagrants, on the look-out for drunken nobles ; or, perchance, watching and waiting till the man whom they have been paid to slay shall appear, to fall beneath the assassin's dagger. The streets of Genoa by night were certainly not fit for any woman to traverse alone, much less one of rank and wealth.

But, nevertheless, a closely-veiled female form may be seen hurrying along the tortuous streets in an obscure part of the town. From the uncertain manner in which she hastened, first to the right, then to the left, halting anon and gazing doubtfully around, it would seem that she had lost her way.

Such was indeed the fact ; and after thus vainly wandering to and fro for some time, the lady (for such she was, by the richness of her dress) ventured to address herself to another foot-passenger.

“ Sir, your assistance. I am lost in the streets.”

The person whom she addressed, by his unsteady gait and wandering eye, was evidently in no fit condition to be a guide ; but the lady, in her alarm and agitation, did not appear to notice this. He of the reeling carriage and bacchanalian appearance halted, and, swaying his body to and fro in the effort to stand erect, gazed stupidly and vacantly at the lady. He was a man of some fifty years, thin, spare, and with an expression of good-humour and drollery on his features which even the liquor he had taken could not entirely obliterate.

His name was Matteo Twitti, and he was by trade a bird-catcher. He is blessed with a good

wife, of whom he stands in very righteous awe, and half a dozen children, all of whom he declares shall become bird-catchers, like their father.

"I am lost in the street," said the lady again, thinking he had not heard her.

"So am I," hiccupped Matteo, vainly endeavouring to stand still.

"I am in great trouble."

"So am I," he again repeated, this time catching hold of a lamp-post.

"I do not know my way."

"No more do I."

"I require assistance."

"So do I," again echoed the bird-catcher; and his words really seemed to be borne out by the fact, for even with the aid of the lamp-post he could scarcely keep his footing.

"I wish to reach my home."

"So do I."

"I wish to go to the Palace Donati."

"So do I."

"I live there."

"So do I."

"You!"

"Yes—at least—that's to say—(hiccup)—in a little house under the palace-wall."

"Who are you?"

"Matteo Twitti,—most accomplished bird-catcher in Italy. Who are you, eh? Pretty clothes—fine lace veil—plumage o' no common bird. You live at Palace Donati? Who are you, eh?"

"I am the Countess Donati."

These words produced a marvellous effect on the inebriate bird-catcher. They seemed to sober him all at once.

"Eh—what ! Countess Donati ? Beg your ladyship's pardon. 'Fraid I've been little too merry ; can't see quite plain. What does your ladyship require ?"

"I wish your assistance to regain my palace. I have just made my escape from a house where I was forcibly detained."

"Certainly, your ladyship. I know the way, though the streets do twist and twist about so. This way, your ladyship. Lean on me, your ladyship ; you seem ill and weary."

So saying, the bird-catcher offered his arm to the Countess with the utmost deference and politeness.

But at this moment another woman turned the corner of a street, and remained transfixed with astonishment as she saw Matteo and the lady. They did not see her ; but she quickly made her presence apparent. Planting herself right in front of the pair—

"Matteo Twitti ?"

His astonishment was great, and also evidently mingled with dismay.

"Quite right."

"My husband !"

"Right again," he replied, with an attempt at a leer.

"And with a female !"

"Right again, my dear."

"Don't dear me, you reprobate, drinking and

carousing your earnings away, and then wandering about the streets with a woman not your wife. Ah, my lady, you may well veil your face; you may well be ashamed—”

“Hush, hush!” said Matteo, endeavouring to stop her. “Be silent, do. You don’t know who this is.”

“I won’t be silent; and I don’t want to know who it is. She ought to be ashamed of herself—the—”

“Hush! it is the Countess Donati.”

And at the same moment the veiled lady uncovered her face.

“Ten thousand pardons, madam! I did not know—did not think it possible a lady of quality could be in the streets of Genoa unattended at this hour—”

“Enough. I am returning from a house where I have been detained against my will; and not being acquainted with this part of the town, had lost my way. I asked this person—your husband—to direct me to the Palace Donati.”

“Surely, surely, your ladyship; we will both go with you.”

“Thanks. You shall be well rewarded for your trouble. Lead on; I wish to be home. My daughter will be anxious.”

Matteo and his wife at once led the way, and they soon emerged on one of the large squares of Genoa.

“Now I know my way; for here is the Palace Donati. I will trouble you no further.”

"Your ladyship had better let us see you to the gate. It is past midnight; and dangerous characters frequent the streets at this hour."

At this moment two other persons approached.

"Count Claudio!" cried the lady, as she recognised one of the new-comers.

"Ah, Countess! we have been searching for you. Poor Francesca is dreadfully alarmed at your absence."

"I feared so, and was hurrying home. Good people, I thank you," she said, turning to the bird-catcher and his wife. "I do not require your further aid. Come to-morrow to the palace, and you shall receive more substantial acknowledgment."

"O Count Claudio," she said, turning to the young man, "I have been so terribly ill-treated."

"Ill-treated! Who has dared—?"

"I will tell you. This evening I went out, and sought the house of Rudiga, the Woman in Red, as she is called."

"The Woman in Red—the Jewess—the supposed sorceress—the fortune-teller—and—and—money-lender!"

Claudio remembered the words of Hector Fiaramonte, and closely watched the countenance of Francesca's mother.

A deep flush mounted from neck to brow at the word money-lender, and the young man at once drew his own conclusions.

"There was, then, truth in what this fellow told me," he thought to himself; "and the Countess

sought the house of the Jewess in order to borrow money."

"For what purpose did you seek the Jewess, Countess?" he asked.

"I wished to have my fortune told," she replied, casting down her eyes in confusion.

"To have your fortune told, Countess! that is indeed strange. One would have thought that the future of the Countess Donati was already assured; that, surrounded by wealth and luxury, blessed with a noble husband, and such a daughter as Francesca, she might have rested content with the happy present, without seeking to pry into the unknown future."

These words filled the Countess with confusion, especially the mention of Francesca; for she remembered the terrible and emphatic words of the Woman in Red:

*"Your daughter is not your daughter."*

However, she regained her self-command, and went on:

"No matter, Count Claudio; let it suffice that I did seek the abode of this terrible woman. Before I had been there long, she commenced a most extravagant tirade, and made the most unfounded assertions. Finally she burst from the room, and locked me in so securely as apparently to defy escape. Fortunately, however, I succeeded in making my escape through one of the windows, and, endeavouring to find my way home, missed the road, and might have wandered about all night had I not met those good people with whom you saw me."



"The Woman in Red went out before you, you say, lady?" asked Hector Fiaramonte.

"Yes, saying that she would keep me there until she had accomplished her designs."

"Her designs! Then she has gone to the Palace Donati," said Hector Fiaramonte confidently.

The Countess turned pale, and a cry of alarm escaped her.

"To the palace! For what purpose?"

"For your daughter, Countess."

"Ha!—for my daughter!" cried the Countess, in the utmost alarm. "How know you this? who and what are you?"

"My name is Hector Fiaramonte, and I have means of knowing that the Jewess has designs against your daughter."

"Do you know this man, Count Claudio? are his words to be relied upon?" cried the Countess, in the greatest agitation.

"I am inclined to believe him," said Claudio briefly

"Come, then,—oh, come!—let us hasten. My darling Francesca is in danger. Count, and you, sir, come with me, I pray; my heart misgives me. Let us hasten to the palace."

---

## CHAPTER VIII.

“NAOMI, BEHOLD YOUR MOTHER!”

THE coloured lamps in the saloon of the Palace Donati, where Francesca waited and watched, cast a soft rosy light on the massive furniture, the gilded cornices, the great mirrors, and the hangings and tapestry of rich Venetian stuff. All around breathes of luxury and refinement. It was indeed an abode fit for a princess; but nevertheless Francesca, amidst all this splendour, was very wretched.

“My mother,” she murmured to herself, “what can have happened to her? My heart misgives, and my soul is weighed down with a dreadful fear of impending evil.”

Ever and anon she arose from the velvet-covered couch on which she was resting, and going to the window, looked wistfully, sorrowfully forth.

It was on one of these occasions, while peering vainly out in the fond hope of discovering the approach of her for whom she waited, that she was startled by a noise behind her.

“Naomi.”

She turned, and saw, at a few paces’ distance only, Rudiga the Jewess—the Woman in Red.

A cry of terror escaped her.

“Fear not, daughter,” said the mysterious woman; “I shall not injure you.”

“What want you, woman?” cried Francesca indignantly, and now recovering her self-possession; “what means this intrusion?”

"What want I?" said the Jewess, half soliloquising; "she asks me what I want! What wants a mother of her only child—her dearly loved one—her long-lost Naomi? O Naomi, Naomi! is it possible the voice of nature is dead within you? Does not your heart yearn for me, your mother, as does mine for you, my lost beloved?"

Her voice rose and quivered with emotion as she spoke, standing with clasped hands, and gazing passionately on Francesca.

"Mother—daughter—Naomi," muttered Francesca to herself; "what can she mean?"

Presently a light seemed to break in on her.

"Ah," she thought, "I see now—the poor woman is mad."

"My poor woman," she said, approaching her, and kindly taking her hand, "you are ill, excited, feverish, and know not what you say. Go home; I will send some one to accompany you."

The Jewess divined the meaning of her pitying words, and snatched away her hand, gazing at the same time in the young girl's face, with a singular expression, half-loving, half-pitying, half-sorrowful.

"And so you think me mad? that what I say is but the wild raving of delirium? It is not so. Listen, daughter, to me."

There was an air of solemnity and earnestness in the words and manner of the Jewess which powerfully impressed Francesca.

"You think, daughter, that you are the child of the Count and Countess Donati. Is it not so?"

"How mean you, woman?"

“I mean that you are not the daughter of the Countess whom you call mother.”

“Not her daughter !” muttered Francesca, turning away, and communing with herself ; “can there indeed be aught in what this terrible woman says ? Her manner seems as though she speaks the truth ; there is that in her air and mien not akin to falsehood. My poor fond mother—for mother you are, and always will be to me—my heart misgives me ! The story of this woman forebodes much misery. I will question her.”

Then turning to Rudiga, and summoning all her self-command, she said :

“Good woman, your words are of strange import. You say I am not the daughter of the Countess Donati. What reason have you for so saying ? and if I am not her daughter—not Francesca Donati—who, then, am I ?”

“I have good reason for what I say—more than good reason—certain knowledge. O Naomi, is nature dead within you ? Do you love this Countess Donati whom you call mother ?”

“Do I love her !” cried Francesca, with tender passion, clasping her hands, and turning her beautiful eyes aloft. “Oh, yes, I dearly love her—my kind, gentle mother ! Her hand soothed my pain when illness was upon me ; her voice calmed my troubled thoughts when aught vexed me ; her tender care brought me up from childhood ; and her all-pervading love has shielded me and guarded me from evil from my earliest days till the present time. And you ask me if I love her ! Ay, though she

were indeed not my mother, I should love her still."

A terrible conflict of emotions racked Rudiga's breast. Her breath came in quick gasps, and her whole frame trembled with emotion, as she listened to the impassioned words of Francesca. Presently she mastered her emotion, and spoke in tones husky and trembling :

"You would love her still, even though you were not her child? And what of the poor mother from whose breast you were torn in early infancy? Have you no pity for her misery—for her broken heart and blighted life? Have you no sorrow for her tears, her lonely existence, robbed by violence of her only child? Have you thought no sorrow for the bitter wrong done to this poor broken-hearted woman? Do you not owe her love—duty?"

"Oh, yes," cried Francesca; "if it is indeed as you say, I deeply pity the poor woman; I grieve for her sorrows, and would gladly alleviate them if I could. But how can I profess to bear love to one whom I have never seen? Should your words indeed be true, it would cause me deep grief; for although I should still bear love to her who has been from infancy a mother to me, I should owe duty to my natural parent."

"Duty only? Have you, then, no tender place, no corner in your heart, for her whose life has been one sorrow?"

"I cannot love one I have never seen."

"You have seen her."

"I have seen her?"

"Yes."

"When? where? Who is she?"

The Jewess drew off a few paces, and, extending her arms, cried, in heartrending tones :

*"Naomi, behold your mother!"*

---

## CHAPTER IX.

### FRANCESCA IS CLAIMED BY RUDIGA.

THE young girl started back, and, speechless with surprise, gazed on the Jewess.

The latter repeated the words, "Naomi, behold your mother," before Francesca could fully gather their import or realise the truth. Then—still gazing on the Woman in Red—she involuntarily shrunk away. There was something terrible in the dramatic attitude and passionate utterance of Rudiga, which compelled a feeling of dread to have place in the bosom of the gentle girl.

The Woman in Red watched the face of Francesca, and read there the varying emotions which swept over her soul.

Her own heart was filled with unutterable anguish.

"Alas, alas!" she murmured, "my daughter loves me not; my daughter fears me; my daughter hates me—*me*, her mother—who would lay down her life to serve her."

And as these thoughts passed through her mind, her whole demeanour changed, and the almost fierce

manner in which she stood with outstretched arms faded away. Her hands drooped and fell by her side. An expression of utter misery and anguish pervaded her worn features ; the fountains of sorrow were opened ; tears forced themselves from her eyes, and rained down her cheeks ; her emotion rose in degree, till, deep sobs bursting from her overladen bosom, she flung herself on her knees at the feet of Francesca, and hiding her face in her hands, cried, in utter self-abasement :

“My daughter, O my daughter, have pity on me !”

Francesca, ever gentle and kind-hearted, took pity on Rudiga's grief. Tears suffused her own eyes, and the deep heart-broken pathos with which the words, “My daughter, O my daughter!” were uttered powerfully affected her. There could be no acting in such a passionate outburst of sorrow, she felt convinced ; and her heart told her that, whether mistaken or not, the Jewess believed she was indeed her mother. But a conviction, amounting almost to certainty, forced itself on her mind—that she was not mistaken, but that there hung a deep mystery about her parentage ; and that the Countess Donati was not her natural parent.

The thought was full of bitterness ; for, irrespective of her deep love for her whom she had always supposed her mother, there arose the tormenting question, How will Count Claudio receive the news that I am not the high-born and wealthy heiress ? Will his love stand the ordeal ?

She could not answer the query.

All these thoughts swept through her mind in a very brief space of time, mingled with a feeling of compassion for the weeping woman at her feet.

"Rise, rise, my poor woman," she said, taking her hand; "do not give way to such grief. From my heart I pity your sorrows, and will do all I can to alleviate them."

The Jewess arose, and, mastering her emotion, asked :

"Supposing, O Naomi, that my words are true—that I can convince you : will you bestow a little love on the poor Jewess, your wretched and injured mother ?"

"Alas" said Francesca sadly; "it is hard to give up the associations and recollections of one's childhood—to look on those whom you have considered as parents in the light of strangers—to regard a stranger as a mother ! But if your words be indeed true ; if I am not Francesca, daughter of the Countess Donati, but Naomi, child of Rudiga the Jewess"—the young girl's voice rose to a pitch of sublime expression—"if I am indeed Naomi, your daughter, the laws of God and of nature would compel me to yield to you my duty and—and—and"—her voice faltered—"and my love."

"Naomi ! my daughter ! my dear daughter ! come to your mother's arms !"

Then she enfolded the young girl in a close embrace, and the two women, mother and daughter (for such in truth they were), mingled their tears together.

While thus locked in a close embrace, the Count-



ess Donati, who had returned to the palace escorted by Count Claudio, entered the saloon unseen and unheard.

Her eyes fell on Francesca—her Francesca—closely embraced by the Woman in Red, weeping on her shoulder.

A terrible cry of grief and rage broke from her.

“Ah !” she cried, “accursed Jewess, what do you here? Begone, or I will have you scourged through the streets.”

Rudiga released Francesca from her embrace ; and the two women stood confronting each other, eyes flaming, bosoms heaving,—angry tigresses in defence of their young ; for each looked upon Francesca as daughter.

---

## CHAPTER X.

### THE COUNTESS AND THE WOMAN IN RED.

THE two women stood thus breathing mutual defiance, glaring angrily one on the other ; each thinking her rights invaded ; each boiling over with fury.

The Countess Donati was the first to break the silence.

“Begone !” she cried angrily, stamping her foot on the ground. “Begone at once, or dread my vengeance.”

“Your vengeance !” said the other scornfully. “Woman, dread *mine*.”

“What want you here ?”

"What want I here? What should a mother robbed of her child want? What want I? I want my daughter."

The Countess Donati turned deadly pale, and pressed her hand to her heart.

*"I want my daughter!"*

The words rang like a knell in her ears. She knew, wretched woman, that her beloved Francesca was not in reality her daughter; and that, though she had nurtured her from her infancy upwards, the girl had no right to call her mother. She had been stolen from her true parent in her earliest infancy. Who that unhappy parent was, she had never known; and now this strange, this terrible woman came forward and claimed her.

A great conflict took place in the mind of the Countess Donati. On the one hand, truth bade her acknowledge that Francesca was not her child, and justice dictated that she should, on proper proof, yield up the girl to her mother. But, on the other hand, pride said nay. And not pride only, but the deep affection she bore the girl she had reared; an affection which had deepened in intensity as the child grew up into the young woman; and now Francesca, beautiful, amiable, and accomplished, was loved by the Countess with a love which bordered on adoration.

The latter considerations prevailed over truth and justice; and drawing herself up, collecting all her energies, she replied to the Jewess:

"It is false, woman; false as your own black heart."

“Woman, you have owned it.”

“False, false again.”

“Ha! and you would deny your words, spoken in my house this very evening?”

“Words wrung from me by fraud and violence, accursed woman; by violence for which you shall pay by imprisonment for your forcibly detaining me in your vile den,—me, wife of a noble of Italy.”

“Talk not to me of prisons, foolish woman,” retorted the Jewess. “Remember the Count Donati, and what I know concerning your affairs. Whence is the hundred and fifty thousand ducats to come, to save the Count from ruin? Answer me, thou who hast robbed a mother of her daughter. Think not,” went on the Jewess, her voice rising to a threatening pitch,—“think not, I say, that Heaven looks on heedless of such a deed of infamy. Already the finger of Providence is laid upon you and yours; already the avenging angel has marked you for his sword, and will smite you first through the Count your husband. Ay, cower and tremble at my words, thou who hast robbed a mother of her child; thief, liar, murderer,—ay, *murderer*, I say; for thy crime killed the poor father, Reuben, my husband, brought down his gray hairs with sorrow to the grave, and made my life a living death. Tremble, I say again. O woman! robber and murderess! quail and crouch before me, who but foreshadow the vengeance of the Most High.”

And, spite of her determination never to yield, spite of her deep love for Francesca, the Countess

Donati did tremble before the menacing aspect and threatening words of the bereaved mother.

The Jewess stood before her with uplifted arms, like a prophetess of old invoking the curse of the Almighty. Her tall form was drawn up to the utmost; her dark eyes flashed lightning; the words came from her lips in ringing, resonant periods, full of energy and vigour. Her uplifted arms, as she invoked the vengeance of the Most High; her strange attire of dark red, with cabalistic belongings; and, above all, a consciousness which forced itself on the mind of the Countess that the woman had right on her side,—struck terror into the soul of the false mother.

She could not for some time find words to reply to the bitter invective of her enemy; for as such she regarded her. It was a strange tableau,—one worthy of a painter's skilful brush.

The two women confronting one another,—the Jewess threatening, commanding, Sibyl-like in her just rage; the other pale, shrinking in spite of herself, and yet mastering her fear, and, with stern determination to yield only with life, putting constraint on the terror which chilled her soul; and deadly pale, with clenched teeth, compressed lips, and heaving breast, giving back glances of scorn, defiance, and hate;—the young girl, too,—shrinking, timid, beautiful as summer night, gazing in alarm from one to the other of the two women, who appeared like tigresses about to battle for their young;—all combined to make up a striking tableau.

“Woman!” hissed Rudiga between her clenched

teeth, and in tones of triumph,—for, despite the defiant glances and forced calmness of her enemy, she read in her soul terror and dismay,—“woman, thou canst not answer me. Own, then, the truth of my words, and make such reparation as you may by restoring me my child.”

“Never! never!” shrieked the Countess. “Accursed Jewess, impostor, daughter of an accursed race, thyself doubly accursed, I defy thee, and dare thee to thy worst.”

“Ha! Is it so? Thy cruel heart prompts to resist in spite of thy remorse-stricken soul; for thou knowest, woman, that thou liest, and I speak truth. Murderess, the hand of Cain is on thy brow, and the vengeance of the Lord shall overtake thee.”

“Darest thou to take in vain the name of our blessed Saviour, accursed Jewess, daughter of a race which persecuted and crucified Him?”

Rudiga pointed to heaven, and said, in solemn tones:

“I speak of Jehovah, the Omnipotent God alike of the Christian and the Jew,—Jehovah, who redresses the wrongs of the injured, and with his vengeance visits the guilty; Jehovah, whose wrath shall smite thee to the earth, whose justice shall rob the robber, avenge the innocent, and bring the guilty to their just and awful doom.”

A deep silence succeeded this denunciation. The soul of the Countess Donati quailed within her. Francesca, poor child, trembled and wept; while the stern Jewess stood as before, a very prophetess, threatening, and terrible in the consciousness of

the justice of her cause. She was the first to speak.

"Woman, restore me my child."

"Never! never!" shrieked the Countess. "I will perish first. Francesca, to my arms, my child, my best-beloved, my more than daughter!"

With these words, she rushed forward and enfolded the girl in a tight embrace.

Rudiga gazed on the pair in silence for a time. A terrible expression of gloomy hate swept over her features.

"I go now," she said; "when I return, I shall take my daughter with me. Naomi, I bid you adieu. Woman" (to the Countess), "beware, and tremble."

Then, with slow step and menacing aspect, the Woman in Red withdrew, leaving the false mother and poor Francesca in terrible dread.

---

## CHAPTER XI.

### BRAVADURA CONSENTS TO ABDUCT FRANCESCA.

RUDIGA, after leaving the Palace Donati, walked slowly home, turning neither to the right nor left, wrapped up in her thoughts, taking no note of external objects. Her dark, careworn face was overspread with a still deeper storm than ordinary, and within her heart raged a very tempest of passion.

She had found her daughter, and yet, though she claimed her, could not tear her away from the false mother. But the bitterest drop in the cup the

Woman in Red had to drink was the fact that her child, her Naomi, looked upon the Countess Donati as her mother, and cherished for her a deep affection.

A fierce determination took root in the heart of the Jewish woman to recover her child at any cost ; and as she traversed the almost deserted streets, but one thought occupied her mind, and that was as to the means by which her object should be attained.

At all risks, at any price, she determined that her child, her Naomi, should be again restored to her arms. A Jewess in a Christian land, she knew that the laws would be strained to her prejudice, more especially when those against whom she appealed for redress were numbered among the nobility of Genoa. Well she knew that an appeal to the tribunals against the Count and Countess Donati would be futile ; even though her case should be indisputably proven, the prejudices and class feelings of her judges would infallibly weigh against her. Failing this, then, two courses were open to her : to meet fraud and force by force ; or to prove her title, and appeal to the sense of duty and goodness of heart of her lost daughter. Suddenly she remembered the thieves who had broken into her house ; one had refused her offered bribe, but the other two might not look on a thousand, perhaps five thousand, ducats with such scornful contempt. To think with the impulsive Jewess was to act. She halted in her walk.

"Those men," she muttered, "I must find them ; one at least of them is, by his looks, a villain, ripe for any thing. I will find them, and offer gold

enough to tempt their greedy souls to a blacker crime than that of restoring a daughter to her mother's arms."

The Woman in Red, during her residence in Genoa, had found use for many agents whom she had employed to ferret out the secrets of those who sought, or were likely to seek, her aid, either in the capacity of fortune-teller or money-lender.

Bravadura and Spada, his worthy accomplice, were seated at a table in a *cabaret*, or drinking-shop, in one of the lowest quarters of Genoa, when they were both struck dumb with astonishment and dismay by the entrance of the Woman in Red. Remembering that only on the previous night they had broken into her house, both the villains imagined that she had tracked them, and now came with the agents of police to arrest and consign them to a prison. With a terrible oath Bravadura started to his feet, and, drawing a great broad-bladed knife, prepared to defend himself. Spada, his companion, also rose, and, seizing the stool on which he sat, stood ready to do battle for his liberty and life; for well both of them knew that their arrest would quickly be followed by their being brought to the gibbet.

Rudiga held up her hand, and addressing them, said: "Fear not; I have not come to harm you."

Bravadura glanced uneasily around, as though expecting to see the police burst in; but when he was quite convinced that the Jewess was alone, he replaced the knife in his sheath, and again took his seat.



"Well, what is it?" he grunted. "What want you with me?"

"Are you willing to earn money?"

"Earn it? That depends on the sort of work to be done for it."

"Would you undertake a dangerous piece of work for a good sum?"

"How much?"

"Five thousand ducats."

"Five thousand ducats!" cried the ruffian, starting to his feet. "Who is he? I'll do it were he the Pope of Rome, if you'll show me the colour of the gold, and give me earnest-money. Who is he?"

The ruffian's eyes gleamed at the thought of so great a sum. A hideous smile illuminated his face, his white teeth gleaming savagely through the thick black beard.

Rudiga could not help regarding her intended agent with loathing and disgust.

"Who is he?" she asked, not understanding his meaning.

"Yes; whose throat am I to cut?—that's what I want to know," he said, with a hoarse laugh. "You don't offer five thousand ducats for nothing."

Rudiga shuddered in spite of herself at the coolness with which he spoke of assassination.

"Man, it is not murder I wish you to do for the money, but a good and righteous act."

"Gammon!" he said, grinning from ear to ear. "People don't give me five thousand ducats for doing good and righteous actions. If you are

squeamish about talking of it, just mention the man's name—that'll be enough for me—and before a week you'll hear of his having met with a bad accident—run a stiletto into his back, just between the shoulder-blades—and, poor fellow, he will be found dead when it is too late for assistance. Then, when the noise and talk attendant on this sad event shall have blown over, your humble servant will wait on you and receive the balance of the money. Come, now ; is it not a very pretty little plan ? Every thing done quietly, and in a gentlemanly manner ; no noise, no fuss. Gentleman dead—easily satisfied ; and second gentleman also satisfied by sum of gold as by agreement."

Rudiga listened to all he said, half in astonishment at the cool audacity of the fellow, half in horror.

The bravo, on the mention of five thousand ducats, at once considered that so large a sum could only be the price of blood. Nor was it easy to undeceive him.

"You know not what you talk of, man ; nor do I fully understand you. Such import, however, as I can gather from your words fills me with horror and repugnance. Know that the deed I wish you to accomplish, and pay you so high a price for, though not unaccompanied by danger, is not a crime."

"Crime !—bah ! There is no such thing as crime. All a foolish prejudice. Why shouldn't I kill a man in order to get money for my supper, as well as a king order the death of thousands in battle to win a province ?"

"Silence ! I will not discuss the point, thou man of blood. The work I wish you to do is to carry off a young girl."

"And—" he drew his hand across his throat significantly.

"No, no!—a thousand times no!" she cried. "I have told you I do not want your aid for a deed of blood, but for one of justice."

"So I have been told before," he replied coolly; "but what my customers call justice generally involves a good deal of blood-letting, and—"

"Enough of this," she interrupted. "Listen while I tell you what you will have to do in order to earn the promised gold. I have said that the deed is a just and righteous one, and not a crime. It is to carry off a young girl and consign her to the arms of—"

"A young gallant with more money than patience. Well, I don't object; it's not the first affair of the kind I've been engaged in. Only, as to its being a just and righteous deed, that is a matter of taste and opinion."

"Stupid fool ! Will you be silent, nor trouble me with your prate, but listen, and let me finish ? You are to carry off this young girl; not to harm her in any way, but to restore her to her mother, from whom she was stolen in infancy."

"Pheu !" he whistled. "Here's a strange piece of business. I've carried off a few girls in my time, but, by all the saints, they were generally taken from, instead of to, their mothers."

"Will you undertake it for the money?"

"Yes—yes. It seems simple enough. Who is the girl, and to whom am I to bring her?"

"You will bring the girl to me,—to a house in the country which I will provide. As to who she is, I will tell you anon."

"Will there be trouble—resistance?"

"There may be; but if you watch your opportunity, you may succeed without other assistance than that of one accomplice."

"Ah! That will suit me. The fewer in a job of the kind, the more honour and glory, and—a-hem! —the more gold to each."

"You are sure you can accomplish the deed?"

"Certain. You are sure you can pay me the money?"

"Ay, though it were ten times the amount. See, here are a hundred gold pieces as an earnest. Come to my house this evening, and I will give you full particulars and instructions."

"Stay; one more question. When must it be done?"

"At once,—before a week shall have elapsed."

"And about a certain prophecy you did me the honour to make in my favour—remember you it?—that, 'ere a month, Satan should have claimed his own'? Does it still hold good?"

"The stars have said so. I know no more. It is naught to me. It is your affair, not mine. Do your work, I will give you the promised reward; then, die or live, as it pleaseth fate to direct."

"A pleasant woman, truly," said Bravadura to his companion, when the Woman in Red had gone.

"She promises me gold, and in the same breath tells me I shall never live to reap the fruits of it."

"To the devil with her!" said Spada. "Who cares for her prophecies? Let us do her bidding; get her gold, and take no thought of her or the stars either."

"Well spoken, worthy friend. Let us have some drink with this earnest-money. It is long since I had a hundred pieces of gold; and as to five thousand ducats, I have never seen so much money. We have fallen into a good thing, Master Spada. What, ho! landlord, bring us wine; we have plenty of money, and shall have more before long."

Wine was brought; and the two companions in crime remained drinking together till night came on, and it was time to go to the house of the Woman in Red.

---

## CHAPTER XII.

### ANOTHER PLOT TO CARRY OFF FRANCESCA.

THERE was deep consternation and grief in the Palace Donati; and although the dreaded Jewess had departed, the Countess and Francesca could not shake off the vague terror which her presence had caused. She had said that she would return, and they knew intuitively that she would keep her word. The Countess Donati had just cause for alarm and dismay. She carried in her breast the knowledge—the terrible secret—that Francesca, her dearly-beloved Francesca, was not her daughter. And now

the words of this woman—her manner and her intimate acquaintance with circumstances none but the real mother could have known—carried conviction to the soul of Constanza Donati that the Woman in Red was indeed the mother of the girl whom she had always looked upon as her own. But, though she bore about with her this inward consciousness, she did not suffer it to find vent in words. She would scarcely own the truth even to herself, and to Francesca vehemently and angrily denied it.

“Mother, dear mother,” the young girl cried, “do tell me that I am indeed your daughter, and not that of the poor Jewess.”

“You are—you are my child. The woman is mad, and I will take steps to have her punished as an impostor. She shall be sent to prison and scourged.”

“No, no, dear mother; do not have her ill-used,” cried the gentle girl. “She has suffered much, and is in deep grief. Poor woman, although she is mistaken with respect to me, I feel sure that she has really lost her child; and doubtless it is that loss which has driven her frantic.”

While mother and daughter thus conversed, the one trying to reassure the other, a servant entered the room.

“A messenger, my lady, has just arrived, bearing a despatch from Venice.”

The Countess took the missive, and, hastily breaking the seal, proceeded to read it. It was from her husband the Count; and as Constanza Donati read it, her heart sank within her. With a cry of

anguish, she threw herself on a couch, and gave way to a burst of uncontrollable grief.

The Count wrote to say that one misfortune had fallen on another ; that he was utterly ruined in a pecuniary sense ; and his only hope of deliverance from his difficulties was the obtaining immediately a hundred and fifty thousand ducats.

The unfortunate Countess had tried in every conceivable way to obtain the money, and had failed in all her efforts. And now ruin stared her in the face. Francesca, her more than daughter, for whom she would risk so much, would be penniless, instead of a wealthy heiress.

The Countess determined on making one great effort to avert the ruin which threatened her husband. She gathered together all her jewels and valuables, as also all Francesca's ; and placing these in a box, she sallied out with the determination of selling or pledging them for their full value. She knew, alas, that the whole together could not amount in value to more than half the money ; but yet she hoped that the full sum might be borrowed, she giving her own security in addition.

It is night, and Francesca is again alone. Her chamber opens into a corridor leading from the great saloon of the Palace Donati. The poor girl is overwhelmed with sorrow ; for besides the trouble in which her mother is involved, the memory of her interview with the Woman in Red weighs heavily on her mind. She remembered her parting words—that she would return to claim her daughter.

The windows of the large saloon look out on a garden tastefully laid out in the Italian style.

Two figures may be observed stealing cautiously along in the shadow, and silently approaching the mansion. They have just alighted from a carriage on the other side of the wall which divides the pleasure-grounds of the Palace Donati from a narrow street running at the back. Both men are cloaked, and both carry swords and wear large overhanging hats. A close observer might notice, even in the darkness, that one has a distinguished air and somewhat haughty carriage.

We will not keep the reader in suspense, but may say at once that one is the Count Claudio, and the other Hector Fiaramonte. They have evidently arranged their plan of action ; for both, without hesitation, commence climbing the trellis-work leading to the open window of the large saloon. Suddenly an exclamation broke from Count Claudio, who was in advance.

“A thousand devils ! what means this ?”

“What ails you, Count ?” asked Fiaramonte ; “is not the way clear enough ?”

“Lower your voice ; we may be heard. The way clear !—too clear ; for see, here is a rope-ladder.”

So saying, Count Claudio laid hold of a ladder of rope, and swung it to Fiaramonte. The latter caught it in his hand, and after gazing at it for a moment, gave vent to a cry of astonishment.

“Hasten, Count ; something is wrong. I know this rope-ladder—have seen it before.

“The devil !”



"It is the devil ; for it belongs to one not apt to stick at trifles ; and if, as I suspect, he is now in the house, it may fare ill with the young lady."

An exclamation of fury broke from the Count.

"To whom, then, does it belong?"

"To Bravadura ; as great a ruffian as ever cut a gentleman's throat for the sake of his purse."

"Bravadura—the bravo, the hired assassin ? what does he here?"

"I know not ; no good, I'll be sworn. We shall know anon. Mount, Count."

Count Claudio swung himself lightly up, and the next moment leaped to his feet in the saloon. Fiaramonte followed his example, and both employed themselves in reconnoitring the situation.

The saloon appeared deserted. An oil-lamp in a coloured shade cast a dim light, just sufficient to distinguish objects by. The saloon appeared untenanted, and Count Claudio, to make assurance doubly sure, took up the lamp and looked carefully all around.

"So far so good, Fiaramonte," he said ; "now to business. It must be done—quietly, I hope ; but it *must be done*."

"Very good, Count. I hope she won't scream."

"I think not ; I will explain to her. She will see the necessity of the step, and grant me her forgiveness for the gentle force circumstances compel me to use."

Still, though he endeavoured to persuade himself that Francesca would not be seriously offended, he felt by no means at his ease. The desperate nature of his circumstances, conjoined with his deep love for

Francesca, seriously embarrassed him. On the one hand was Rudiga, the Woman in Red, who claimed her ; on the other was the Countess, who also asserted her right to the girl.

"But supposing she resists, and raises an outcry?"

"At all risks, she must be carried off. My deep love must afterwards be my excuse ; her own heart too will plead for me."

While Claudio, bent on carrying off by force the object of his mad passion, was talking with his accomplice, Francesca, in utter ignorance of the danger which menaced her, was calmly asleep in an adjoining room. She had not undressed, preferring to await her mother's return before doing so.

From the fact of the rope-ladder hanging from the window, Claudio and the other knew that some one besides themselves must have gained admission to the house. Taking the lamp in his hand, Claudio proceeded to explore thoroughly first the saloon, and afterwards the corridors which led from it. There were two of these, in one of which was the chamber of Francesca. He examined this first, passing noiselessly right to the end. When he had satisfied himself that no one was there, he retraced his steps, and was on the point of reëntering the saloon, with the intention of searching the other passage, when Fiaramonte suddenly laid his hand on his arm.

"A light,—see, a light ; some one is moving."

Now that his attention was called to it, Count Claudio noticed a dim, flickering light, coming as though from a shaded lantern in the large hall.

Cautiously he advanced, and concealing himself behind a pillar, looked out sharply, first, however, putting out the light he carried. He could make out the figure of a man stealing noiselessly about. He carried with him a small lantern. He presently set this down on a table, and commenced tampering with the lock of a large safe, endeavouring to open it.

It was our friend Bravadura; and apparently his design was robbery. Fiaramonte stole silently up to him, and just as he was about opening the cabinet, laid his hand upon his shoulder. Bravadura started, as though shot; and, with a savage oath, drew his knife and prepared to defend himself.

So soon, however, as he recognised Fiaramonte, he refrained from attacking him.

"What brings you here?" he growled.

"And what brings you? No good, I'll be bound."

"Good or no good, that's my business; so just attend to yours, and leave me alone."

"What is your object?" again asked Fiaramonte.

"Can't you guess?"

"Gold?"

"Yes; gold in the first place; in the second, something else; but curse it, the man who promised to aid me has played me false. I shall have to do the job alone, unless you feel inclined for a cut in with me. What say you? I'll make it worth your while."

"What is it?" asked Fiaramonte.

"You know the Jewess—the Woman in Red?"

"Yes."

Count Claudio held his breath, and listened intently.

"Well, this Woman in Red has employed me to do a little business for her, and promises liberal pay."

"And the nature of the business?"

"Oh, a mere bagatelle—only to carry off and convey to a place fixed on by her a young girl—"

"A girl! for what purpose, and where is the girl?"

"For what purpose I neither know nor care. As to who the girl is—she is in this palace, and they call her Francesca Donati. I have ascertained which is her room. Come, what say you? A third share in the reward shall be yours. Yes or no?"

"No."

"Then go to the devil, and leave me alone."

"I shall not go to the devil; and so far as carrying this girl off, I shall not leave you alone."

By this time Bravadura had succeeded in breaking open the cabinet, and quickly possessed himself of the contents, without opposition on the part of Fiaramonte.

All this time Count Claudio remained concealed behind a pillar, watching and listening.

Bravadura, having pocketed the contents of the cabinet, took up his lantern and advanced towards the corridor, in which was the room of Francesca.

Fiaramonte placed himself in the way.

"Where are you going, my good friend?"

"What, in the name of all the devils, has that to

do with you ? Stand on one side, or it will be the worse for you."

But Fiaramonte showed no disposition to move.

"Hell and furies ! Will you be off, and mind your own business ?"

"No, I will not. You shall not pass here."

Foaming with rage, Bravadura drew his knife, and, without another word, rushed on his old companion in sin. There was a struggle, brief but severe. Fortunately for Fiaramonte, he contrived, by skill and good-luck, to wrest from the other his knife. Still, however, the burly ruffian was an overmatch for his adversary, by reason of his great strength ; and at the end of a few minutes Fiaramonte was hurled, bruised and bleeding, to the ground.

Bravadura repossessed himself of his knife, and again advanced towards the corridor. But at this moment Count Claudio stepped from behind the pillar, and pointing his sword to his breast, bade him begone.

"Back, ruffian ! you pass not here."

Bravadura, blind with passion, then threw himself forward, making desperate blows with his long knife.

But in Claudio he had a skilful and wary antagonist, though his light sword seemed to be inferior to the huge knife of the bravo. He handled it so skilfully, drawing blood from several places in a very short time, that Bravadura was compelled to retreat to avoid being run through the body.

The windows on one side looked out on to a creek

which ran into the harbour. The waters of the bay washed the base of the wall. Driven up close to this by the swift sword of Claudio, the bandit in retreating tripped, and fell headlong through the window into the sea below.

There was a cry of horror and agony, a splash, and then all was silent.

The murderer of Margaret d'Arbel had gone to his last account.

"The Woman in Red prophesied that ere a month he would be dead," said Fiamonte solemnly. "Her words have come true."

---

## CHAPTER XIII.

### THE COUNTESS REFUSES THE ORDEAL.

THE affray, though so quickly ended, of necessity alarmed the household. The stamping of feet, and the combatants struggling together; the fierce oaths of Bravadura, and the clash of steel as Claudio's sword came in contact with the bravo's huge knife,—all combined to create a great uproar.

The sound of approaching footsteps, and the ringing of a bell, warned Claudio to fly. He was about clambering from the same window by which he had entered, when Francesca ran into the room, followed by several domestics carrying lights.

Claudio knew that he was seen and recognised; so he gave up the idea of escape, and stood before her, not knowing what to say or do.

"Claudio!" she said, "you here,—and at this time! What means it,—and this uproar?"

He hesitated what to say; but presently, regaining his self-possession, he replied calmly:

"Nothing, my dear Francesca; nothing. I have only been expelling an intruder."

"Expelling an intruder! How? what mean you?—who was the intruder?"

"A ruffian who proposed to carry you off by force, dearest, and who has paid for his audacity with his life."

"To carry me off by force! This is incomprehensible," she exclaimed. "And you—what do you here yourself? You say you had been expelling an intruder,—what means your presence? How came you here?—not by the gate, for that is closed."

Claudio coloured up with confusion and shame, and knew not what to reply.

Francesca's eye, glancing round the room, fell upon the open window and the rope-ladder fastened to the sill.

"Ha!" she exclaimed, "a light begins to dawn on me. You entered like a thief in the night—*you*, Claudio; with what object is best known to yourself. It is you who dared to intrude—"

"Francesca," said Claudio humbly, "send all away, and I will explain."

With a motion of the hand the young girl dismissed the attendants who crowded the room; and so soon as they were alone, Claudio fell on one knee before her.

"Lady,—Francesca, dear Francesca,—my great

love must be the excuse for my presumption. I will own the truth, and sue for pardon at your feet. Driven frantic by my despair at the thought of losing you, my heart's idol, I dared to think that, should I end all difficulties by carrying you off and placing you safe from those who would part us, your generous heart would plead in my favour, and that you would consent to give me your hand, and forgive the stratagem by which I became possessed of you. Francesca, I have spoken the truth. Pity and forgive me."

A burning flush of wounded modesty and just indignation suffused the maiden's face, neck, and bosom.

"Count Claudio, rise. I thought you worthier, and little dreamed that you would ever dare presume so far. You have grossly insulted me. I forgive you. Now rise : henceforth we are strangers."

Her voice faltered as she spoke this sentence ; but nevertheless there was an air of decision about her which caused the baffled Count's heart to sink within him.

"Have you no pity, Francesca, for my great love?"

"I have no pity for such love as yours ; for that must be but a hollow mockery of love which would use force and wrest by violence what should be only freely granted. Rise, Count Claudio ; I have spoken."

"Ay, rise, Count Claudio ; my daughter speaks well."

He started to his feet, for there before him stood the Countess Donati, who had but just returned.



Almost at the same instant there fell on his ears the sonorous tones of *another* voice.

*"Ay, rise, Count Claudio; my daughter has spoken well."*

A slight scream broke from Francesca; while the Countess Donati gave vent to a cry as though a poniard had pierced her heart.

"The Jewess—the Woman in Red!" cried Claudio. "Woman, what want you? what do you here?"

"What do I here? Ha, ha! you do well to ask me, Count Claudio; you, who would have torn a young maiden away by force, and compelled her to your arms; you, who in the dead of night, with your hireling assassins, steal in through open windows like a thief, and with worse than a thief's object in view,—it is well, very well, for *you* to ask me, Count Claudio, what I do here."

There was an intensity of scorn in the accents and manner of the Jewess which could not but have its effect. But he determined to put a bold face on the matter.

"It is false, accursed woman,—false; and you know it."

An exclamation of fury broke from her.

"Silence, rash boy; 'tis not false. But now I heard you own it, as did yon woman" (pointing to the Countess Donati). "Besides, for my own ends, I myself kept watch over the Palace Donati, and I saw you scale the wall and mount to the window."

"Ha! and what, then, was your object, sorceress, in sending your own emissary? Supposing your

words true, did not you charge your ruffian accomplice, who has paid the penalty of his life for the attempt, to carry off the girl?"

"And what if I did? Who has a better right than I, her mother—I, Rudiga the Jewess, called the Woman in Red?"

"It is false, accursed hag!" shrieked the Countess, as she heard her,—“false as your own heretical soul!"

"It is not false," said the Jewess sternly; "it is true: I have the proofs."

A dead silence fell upon her hearers as she produced a packet of papers from her bosom, and commenced to unfold and arrange them. All watched and waited for her next words with breathless interest, for a presentiment told them that the *dénouement* approached.

"Francesca," said the Jewess to the maiden, "approach."

She obeyed unresistingly, as though impelled by a hidden power.

The Jewess took one of the papers from the roll, and unfolded it. It was a torn and soiled document, and bore on the face of it evidence of considerable antiquity.

Addressing the girl, the Jewess spoke as follows, in tones of great solemnity:

"Francesca, daughter, heed well what I am about to say. That you are indeed my daughter, I know full well, and will shortly convince you. The voice of nature is strong in my heart; nor is it silent in yours,—I read it in your eyes, your look,

your agitation. You know, O daughter, that I speak the truth—that my claim to you is sanctioned by the immutable laws of the Most High; and though for a time the evil-doer may triumph, God will assuredly redress the wrongs of the injured, and punish the guilty, when it shall seem fit to His all-seeing wisdom. Speak, Francesca! I am about to convince thee that I am no vain boaster, but that I can prove my words. Wilt thou fly in the face of nature? and when I have convinced thee that I speak truly, and am indeed thy mother, wilt thou refuse thy obedience—deny that I am thy mother? Surely it cannot be!”

Francesca gazed in the utmost distress first on one, then on the other of the claimants. On the one hand was habit, and the love she bore the Countess, who had ever been to her the kindest and most indulgent of parents; on the other hand, the words and manner of the Jewess were such as to *compel* her to believe them true, and, above all, a still small voice whispered within her, that in the Woman in Red she saw her mother! She could scarce define the feeling; but each moment it gained in strength. It seemed as if, though from the far-distant past, dim memories of the voice and the features of the Jewess arose and bore witness to the truth of her story.

Between the two feelings, love and duty, the poor girl's mind was in sad trouble and perplexity.

The Woman in Red watched her perplexity with ill-concealed satisfaction. She saw that she had created a great impression on the girl's mind.

Both the Countess Donati and Claudio were silent. They waited to hear what she had to say, and judge then whether she could maintain her pretensions or not. But each inwardly felt a conviction that she was right, and would establish her case.

As for Hector Fiaramonte, he was so stricken with superstitious awe at the death of Bravadura, and the fulfilment thereby of Rudiga's prophecy, that he stood in very wholesome awe of her, and, fearing lest she might adventure a like prediction with regard to himself, kept at as great a distance and as much out of sight as possible.

Presently the Woman in Red again spoke, not hurriedly or diffidently, but slowly, deliberately, as though well knowing what she said, and the effect it would have. She held out a paper she had in her hand.

"Here is a document, signed by the worthy curé of the village of Castellán, regarding the infant daughter of one Miriam, a Jewess, and her husband Reuben. A foul murder was committed, and the child stolen from one Margaret d'Arbel, who had her in custody during the temporary absence of her parents. A proclamation was made by the authorities, offering a large reward for the discovery of the murderer ; and as the identification of the stolen child would tend to bring the murderer to justice, the most accurate description was given of her. Here is the original of the description displayed in the market-place of Castellán. It is duly attested by the curé and the prefect. The description speaks

of a female child, about a year old; complexion fair, eyes blue, and skin very soft and delicate. On the front of the left shoulder there is a peculiar mark spoken of; it consists of seven small moles, arranged almost in a circle. The shape and number are so peculiar, that there can be no mistake. Francesca, come hither."

The girl obeyed tremblingly.

"It is false,—all a vile forgery," cried the Countess Donati fiercely. "The woman knows of the marks, and has trumped up this story and forged the paper."

"It is not false, O woman, and you know it. See, sec," she cried, raising her voice to a higher key, and at the same time baring the girl's shoulder. —"see the mark, the evidence of the truth of my words. Francesca, daughter, come to my arms!"

Then she folded her in a close embrace, the girl not attempting to resist.

Great was the jealous rage of the Countess as she saw Francesca enfolded in the arms of the hated Jewess.

"Francesca," she shrieked wildly, "leave that woman instantly! She is an impostor. I, your mother, command you."

Still clasping Francesca tightly, Rudiga raised her head, and regarded her rival sternly.

"You her mother!" she said, in accents of scorn and bitter hate; "*you!* False as your own cruel heart! • Come, I will put you to the test."

There was a wild gleam in the eye of the Jewess, which threatened ill; and spite of her courage and

determination, the spirit of the Countess quailed within her.

The Jewess stood with outstretched arm, like an accusing angel, and demanded of the Countess :

“Is this girl your daughter?”

“Yes, my daughter.”

“Liar! Darest also be a perjurer? I will try thee.”

Then, advancing threateningly, she cried :

“Swear it; and peril thy soul if thou speakest false!”

The Countess Donati trembled at the terrible ordeal, the false oath she was challenged to make; but, nerving herself by a desperate effort,—for she knew that Francesca was intently regarding her, and that her answer would seal her fate one way or the other,—she spoke :

“Yes, yes; she is my daughter. Why should I not swear it?”

She was deadly pale as she spoke, and her whole frame shook visibly.

“We will try thee. If thou canst take this oath, O Christian, thou art fallen low indeed!”

Then, with solemn step and action, Rudiga approached a niche in the wall of the saloon, and took down a small crucifix.

The Countess Donati shuddered with horror. She divined her intention.

“Woman, thou sayest this girl is thy child. I challenge thee to swear it on this emblem of thy faith.”

The Countess Donati turned deadly pale.

The Jewess approached, and tendered her the crucifix ; but the guilty woman shrunk back in horror.

“ Swear ! ”

“ Yes, swear, mother, dear mother—swear that I am indeed your daughter. I will believe you, and love you ever as of old.”

The Countess took the cross in her trembling hand ; but suddenly her horror at the idea of the dreadful perjury she was called on to commit overwhelmed her.

She let fall the cross as though it had blistered her hand, and, with a wild despairing shriek, cried :

“ I cannot, I cannot ; for *she is not my daughter.* ”

---

## CHAPTER XIV.

### FRANCESCA TAKES AN OATH.

THE confession wrung from the Countess Donati struck all present with dismay. The Jewess stood the queen of the situation ; while the unfortunate Constanza Donati was utterly crushed and broken in spirit. She could not muster courage enough to look Francesca in the face, till the latter spoke to her.

Running up to her as she lay on a couch, hiding her face, and giving vent to her grief in deep sobs, Francesca seized her hands, and pressing them fondly, endeavoured to console her.

“ Mother, dear mother,—for to me you ever have been one,—do not grieve ; though I am not indeed

your daughter, I will, please Heaven, always act as such. Yours was the hand that reared me from my infancy, yours the voice that first taught me to lisp the sacred name of mother. To you, then, my love and gratitude are ever due, and shall ever be rendered."

"And what of me, O Naomi, my daughter?" said the Jewess, in a voice full of emotion.

Francesca went up to the Woman in Red, a sweet smile on her beautiful face ; she took her hand.

"To you—for I can no longer doubt that you speak truth, and that you are indeed my parent—to you I owe duty. It is for you to command, for me to obey. I have known little of you ; you have been to me a stranger, although I am your daughter. Time may ripen a sense of duty into a feeling of love. I pity your misfortunes, and will pray to Heaven for your welfare ; more I cannot say."

"It is the voice of an angel speaking," cried the Jewess rapturously. "My child, my darling child, Heaven will listen to your prayer, and the poor Jewess will once again possess her daughter and her daughter's love."

She folded Francesca in a close embrace, and held her so for a second or two ; then she released her, and addressing her and the Countess Donati, said :

"Listen to what I am about to say : It has pleased Heaven to point out to me my long-lost daughter, but not yet to restore her to my arms. The Ruler of all will complete His work in His own time. Meanwhile the child grieves at the thought



of being torn from the home and associations of her childhood. Is it not so, Naomi? Speak, and fear not."

"Oh, yes, yes; do not take me away; let me remain here but a little time longer."

"My child, it shall be as you wish—at least for a time," said the Jewess, smiling sadly. "The hour for my full restitution in my rights has not yet come; for know, Constanza Donati, that I, Rudiga the Jewess, will not take my daughter until I have won back the love of which you have robbed me. I will not tear her away, while yet a stranger, at the sacrifice of her happiness—perhaps at the risk of her life. No; for the present she may remain with you; but so sure as Jehovah reigns in heaven, He will work upon her heart, and her love will insensibly wander back to me, her mother. When that shall have happened, then, and not till then, will I reclaim her."

Turning to the maiden, she said:

"Naomi, I have decided, for the sake of your happiness, to let you remain under the care of the Countess Donati, your foster-mother."

The girl bent her knee, and kissed the hand of the Jewess.

"Promise me," continued the latter, "that when I claim you, at the expiration of three years, you will willingly come, and yield me your obedience, duty, and love."

"I promise," murmured the girl faintly.

"Swear by the Almighty, and call His vengeance down on the head of yourself and the Countess should you refuse obedience."

"I will swear."

"You will swear, at the end of three years, to come to me, wherever you may be, whomsoever you may be with."

"I swear."

Then the Jewess dictated an oath, which Francesca, pale and trembling, did not refuse to take.

"Rise, daughter ; rise, Naomi. I, your mother, leave you now ; but only for a time. In three years, wherever you may be, I shall not fail to claim thee. As for you, sir," she said, turning to Count Claudio, "begone ! you shall never again set eyes on my daughter."

"Begone," echoed the Countess Donati, remembering the late audacious attempt of the young man.

"Francesca," he said despairingly, "will you not forgive me ?"

"Count Claudio, you have grossly and wantonly insulted me this day : I wish to see you no more. Henceforth we are strangers ; not even in my thoughts shall you be present. I now tear your image from my heart, and dismiss you for ever."

He bowed his head.

"As you will. I now feel reckless, and equal to any desperate deed. Francesca, I loved you ; and because the very violence of my love impelled me to an indiscretion, you dismiss me for ever ! Be it so. Cruel girl, you care not to what you doom me—to a life of violence, of crime ; to a bitter, dreary existence ; with but little hope for the future, no pleasure in looking back on the past. Adieu."

She was about to speak, perhaps somewhat re-

lently ; but before she could give utterance to the words, he was gone.

"Alas," she sighed inwardly, "I shall never see him again! Fate is very cruel."

The Jewess embraced her new-found daughter, repeated her words of warning and command, and also took her departure.

We will leave them for a while, and follow the fortunes of Count Claudio and others, which are closely interwoven with our story.

Reckless, driven to despair by the words of Francesca, the young Count cared little now what became of him. He loved Francesca deeply and truly ; and though he looked to the dowry which he expected with her to relieve him from his embarrassments, that was not the object of his desires.

Even when he learned that her father the Count was ruined, and that there was no hope of wealth with the daughter, he had determined not to give her up. Now, then, that she had discarded him, he felt the wound deeply, and at once plunged into a career of reckless dissipation. The small remnant of his property rapidly disappeared ; and in less than a week he was utterly ruined. The gaming-table was now his only hope of retrieving his lost fortunes ; and here he was, night after night, a constant attendant.

At last the catastrophe of his fortunes arrived. He had played all one night, with desperate and never-failing ill-fortune, against the bank. His watch, his ring, every article of jewelry—every

thing which could be turned into money—all were staked, and all swept away ; till, at four o'clock in the morning, the once gay, dashing, and wealthy Count Claudio stepped out into the street a penniless outcast.

There was another gentleman whose ill-luck had been even worse than that of Count Claudio, in that he played for heavier stakes and as uniformly lost, till at the closing of the rooms he rose as utterly ruined as was the other. He was a middle-aged man, richly dressed, and by his appearance of some consequence.

He followed Count Claudio out of the saloon, and walked behind him unseen down the broad staircase leading to the street.

“Ruined — ruined ! utterly and irretrievably ruined !” ejaculated Claudio to himself. “I have not my sword left ; and, failing all else, must do as many another ruined noble has done—turn brigand.”

“By the saints, not a bad idea !” exclaimed the other, who had overheard him. “Excuse me, sir, for listening, but I heard your words ; and as I am exactly in the same position myself, I take the liberty of addressing you. Were you serious when you spoke of turning brigand?—or, rather, say mountain-chief ; it is more polite.”

“Serious ! why not ? I see no other career open.”

“By Heavens ! young spark, I am with you. Your name, young sir ?”

“Count Claudio. And yours ?”

“I am the Count Donati.”

An exclamation of surprise broke from Claudio.

Before him stood the father—or the supposed father—of Francesca. Neither Claudio nor Count Donati were acquainted with each other, and this was the first time they had met. Donati had not the least idea of the events of the last week at his palace, as he had only been able to pay a flying visit there, on account of the desperate state of his affairs; even now he was in Genoa incognito, and if recognised, might be seized and incarcerated at any moment. His wife the Countess and Francesca were in too much trouble about recent events, and the impending ruin which hung over the house of Donati, to enter into particulars of the past; and thus the Count remained in total ignorance of the state of affairs. One thing he knew too well, and that was, that he was utterly ruined.

Count Claudio mastered his astonishment at hearing the name, and replied at once :

“Agreed; I am with you.”

“How many men can you get to follow you?”

Claudio thought for a moment.

“Hector Fiaramonte can procure me as many vagabonds and cutthroats as I want. He shall be my lieutenant.”

Then he replied to the Count :

“I dare say, about twenty.”

“Good. I will provide forty. I have yet some silver plate at my palace; I will obtain and sell it. The Countess has a scanty income in her own right; she must manage to subsist on it with Francesca; for henceforth she will see but little of the noble Count her husband. Come: it is agreed I shall find

forty men, and arm and equip them ; you find twenty. I will be leader ; you shall be my lieutenant. Is it agreed ?”

“Agreed.”

They shook hands on it ; and thus it was settled.

“Let us meet to-morrow night at this hour,” said Count Donati to Claudio. “I will turn what few valuables I have into money, and therewith purchase arms and equipments.”

“I will go seek my worthy friend Hector Fiarante, who, I doubt not, will suit our purpose. He and I will meet you at the appointed time.”

Then the two separated ; Count Donati returning to the palace, and Claudio going to seek the valiant Hector.

When they met on the following night, each had performed his part of the compact ; and the two ruined nobles took to the mountains, at the head of a band of sixty men, armed and equipped.

---

## CHAPTER XV.

### AN UNWELCOME VISITOR.

NEARLY three years have passed, and the time approaches for the fulfilment of the compact entered into by the Woman in Red and the Countess Donati. The Count Donati has long since disappeared from Genoa, but people said that Rudiga the Jewess knew of his dark deeds and the lawless life he led. But at the end of three years Count Donati reap-

peared at Genoa, no longer the ruined, penniless noble, but possessed of ample means.

This part of our story opens upon a sunny scene. Genoa in summer is one of the most charming cities in Italy; and the villas of the suburbs are renowned for their luxurious elegance, and the wealth of the nobles and retired merchants who inhabit them. In one of these charming residences there has lately taken up his abode a portly and well-fed gentleman, of some fifty years of age. He is called Count Donati, and is said to have come from Paris. Little is known about him, and as he is wealthy and pays liberally for every thing, people do not trouble themselves much about his business. Still, there are rumours afloat any thing but complimentary to the past life of the Count. It is known that he suddenly disappeared some years back deeply in debt, and also under the displeasure of the government. It is known that all his estates were confiscated, and he was generally supposed to be a penniless outcast, bankrupt alike in fortune and reputation.

There had been terrible scenes in the Palace Donati at Genoa before the final crash came. The Countess and her supposed daughter Francesca suddenly disappeared. No one knew whither they went nor what became of them. At the same time, too, the gay and dashing Count Claudio—a young nobleman renowned alike for his handsome person, his recklessness, and his extravagance—also disappeared. He, too, it was well known, had dissipated the whole of his property, and was, besides

heavily in debt. Strange rumours were afloat shortly after the vanishing of these two nobles as to their pursuits. A band of audacious brigands suddenly became notorious for the success and daring of their robberies. The chief of this lawless band was called Bernardo, and his second in command Rodolpho. But it was reported that Bernardo was no other than the Count Donati, and Rodolpho young Count Claudio. There was nothing improbable in such a story in those days; and in that country many a bankrupt noble might be found among the lawless bands who infested the mountains. These gentry, having lost, gambled, or dissipated their property, as a last resource, either joined an existing band, or, contriving to beg or borrow a little money, themselves raised one, and became freebooters, robbing and plundering travellers in the mountains, and occasionally making descents on to the plains.

Though the government, at once feeble and tyrannic, did their utmost to suppress these lawless marauders, their efforts were vain. Occasionally one of the chiefs would be taken and hanged without mercy; but this had no effect. Barring the unpleasant contingency of this sudden termination of a lawless career, the life had its attractions. The peasantry and common people feared and admired these mountain-robbers; while even the rich, who fell victims, did not look upon them as very heinous offenders, and usually went on their journeys with a sufficient escort to protect them from attack. But after the disappearance of Count Donati and Claudio, there arose a band so numerous, well-appointed, and



audacious, that no one was safe ; and even the government convoys of treasure had been attacked, and the soldiers defeated. As we have said, it was rumoured that these two ruined nobles were at the head of the brigands whose depredations and boldness exceeded any thing that had previously been heard of. Count Donati, after a disappearance of nearly three years, suddenly reappeared in Genoa, where he took up his abode. Rumour said that he was himself the notorious Bernardo, and after realising vast sums of money, had now resolved to retire from so perilous a life. But it was rumour only. There was no shadow of proof of the fact, and he cared nothing for a vague report. He brought with him a young lady,—his daughter, as was supposed. But of her more anon.

The Count, at the time of which we speak, is reclining on a rich divan, enjoying his after-dinner *siesta*. Beside him there sat two slaves engaged, the one in shading his master's face, and the other wielding a large fan over his head. Whether the generous dinner he had devoured had oppressed him, or whether the copious draughts of wine in which he had indulged had disturbed his brain, would be difficult to say ; but, at all events, he did not seem at ease, but tossed and turned on the couch, unable to rest.

"A cigarette, Copo," he said presently to one of his servants, in gruff and unpleasant tones.

Copo disappeared, and returned in an instant with some choice cigarettes on a silver salver. He had scarcely lighted his delicate cigar, which he

smoked through an amber mouthpiece, when a cloud of dust was seen at the end of the courtyard in front, and a jaded horse, apparently worn out with fatigue and rough usage, halted at the outer gate. The beast was mounted by an ill-dressed stranger, whose slouched hat and dust-covered clothes offered very slight warrant for welcome at this lordly old dwelling. Count Donati looked out a moment at the intruder, and then throwing himself back on his divan, in the lazy attitude which he most loved, he awaited further developments, with the simple query to Copo :

“ Who is that ? ”

Now Copo, or his companion in service, the sharp-witted Pinta, knew little and cared less who came to see his master ; and so they looked, and both answered that they “ didn’t know.”

At the further extreme of the long piazza of the main house there were three rows of lattice-work, or Spanish blinds, which shadowed three windows of the great reception-room. When the old Italian inquired “ Who is that ? ” the middle range of lattice turned with a quick movement ; and as the stranger alighted and came up the walk slowly, a pair of brilliant eyes might have been seen through one of the interstices fixed intently and curiously upon the new-comer. He was a youngish man, apparently ; but his motions were heavy, and seemingly in a measure decrepit. He secured his horse at the gate, and advancing to the very last stair on the terrace, he removed his slouched hat, and wiped the perspiration from his forehead with his hand.

"Give you good day, Count," he exclaimed, addressing himself at once to the dozing Count.

"Well, what now?" inquired Count Donati, without deigning to turn his head.

"I have come a long distance, Count, to speak with you. The day is sultry, and I am now fasting since yesternight."

"That is no business of mine," said the old Italian.

"Yes, it is, Signior."

"Who are you?"

"A poor man in distress."

"We have such men here every day in the month."

"You do not have me here often, Count ; and I pray you give me a draught of good wine, and bid your fellows see to my horse yonder. She has borne me five-and-twenty Italian leagues since day-break without an ounce of barley."

"And what is that to me? Off with you! lest I set the hound after you."

At this moment, for the first time, the stranger heard a low snarl, and, turning aside, he beheld the teeth of a miserable bloodhound just beyond him, lying under the shadow of a cluster of ever-greens.

"Ha, ha!" grinned Count Donati viciously. "I see you will be civil, at any rate. The dog's a good beast, but doesn't fancy your costume. Be quiet, Carlo ; quiet, sir."

"Let him show his teeth, Signior, an' he will. Come, since you are so inclined, release him. He is

a vicious cur, like his master. You shall send him at me, and I will show you how I will make his acquaintance."

"Out on you, fellow, for a stupid fool!" retorted the Count tartly. "If I pleased to say to him, 'Go there!' thy skin would be the worse for having ventured within the gate."

"Will it please you, Count, to let him come? I have said he is a cur, like to his master."

"What means the fellow?"

"What he says, Signior."

"Out, then! Out of my gates!"

"Not until my errand here is accomplished."

"Speed thee, then, and do thy errand, or, by St. Peter, my dog shall drive thee hence."

"Will it please you, Count, to order my hungry horse some grain?"

"No!"

"Indeed you will anon," continued the stranger, approaching him more closely. "I come from Rodolpho."

"What?" exclaimed the Italian, quickly springing up. "Tell me, stranger—I doubt thy words—the proof that thou so comest."

"It is here," said the traveller at once, and he pointed to a heavy signet-ring upon his left hand.

"Come in, come in. Copo, Pinta, see to the horse."

"And, mind you," said the stranger, "she must have good care and faithful grooming."

"See to it," added Donati, extending his hand to

the traveller, and leading him into the mansion without further hesitation.

The wayfarer very soon found himself comparatively at home. A choice repast of excellent fruit and delicious wine was instantly placed before him, and an explanation quickly followed.

"You come from Count Claudio? What can I do—that is, how can I serve my old friend?"

"Your old companion, I believe?"

"Companion? Ah, yes, yes; partner, you mean."

"Well, partner in trade, if you like that term better; partner or companion."

"You know, then—"

"Yes; I know Rodolpho, and I know Bernardo."

"Bernardo! Who—who was he?"

"It is a good while ago."

"Yes, yes; that is, I suppose—"

"I know. It is a long while since you and he *travelled together*, eh?"

"Exactly. But how did he know—you know—that I was here?"

"Ha, ha! Did you suppose that you could live here in all this fine style, and never be known again save as the Count Donati?"

"But I am the Count Donati."

"Yes; and you were Bernardo."

"Hush! not too loud! You don't know. You may have heard—"

"Pshaw! after what I have said, we may speak in confidence, I think."

"But—"

"There is no occasion for 'but's,' Count. I am here to ask an accommodation of you."

"Well?"

"Business with us has been indifferent for the past two years; and since your retirement from the profession, we have got to be poor. We have an enterprise in view for the coming winter; but in the mean time we must live, you see—eh?"

"Well, go on."

"The chances in the mountains are not so promising as they were five years ago, when you were one of us. We are out of ready means, and we—that is to say, Rodolpho has commissioned me to communicate with you, and to ask the loan of twenty thousand ducats."

"*What!*" exclaimed the tight-fisted Italian, springing fiercely up, "twenty thous—"

"Twenty thousand ducats, I said," continued the dusty beggar, without changing the expression of his face, or seeming for a moment to notice the Count's embarrassment.

"Twenty thousand ducats!" said Count Donati, catching his breath once more. "It is a vast sum."

"I know it," responded the beggar.

"Was the man—mad?"

"I think not, Count."

"Then he was drunk, to be sure, to make such a demand of me."

"I should say not drunk either, Count; for he will drink only good wine, as you are aware; and Heaven knows that he has not of late had the means

to obtain his favourite beverage in any extravagant quantities. But, Count," added the stranger, as he filled his goblet with another draught of the choice liquor before him, — "Count, your good health! By the Mass, it is seldom of late that Rodolpho has put his lips to such nectar as this!"

"Ten thousand ducats!" exclaimed Count Donati, as if speaking to himself.

"Twenty thousand, Count."

"Eh? what?"

"Twenty thousand, by your leave."

"Ay, twenty! This is a modest demand, to be sure."

"An accommodation only, Count; it will be returned, no doubt."

"Bah! Count Claudio cannot be in earnest in this matter, for he knows that I do not possess so much."

"Ha, ha, ha!" screamed the beggar.

"Why do you laugh?"

"Laugh, Count! Your pardon for the rudeness; but Rodolpho has not forgotten how much of gold and plate and jewels fell to Bernardo's final share of the accumulated spoils, when, less than two years since, he *dissolved partnership*—I think this is the term—with that noted individual. I warrant me the value of those precious gains has not since lessened in Count Donati's hands."

"I cannot do it," insisted Count Donati firmly.

"Yes, you can."

"I cannot—will not!"

"I think you will, Count."

"This is monstrous! I will not willingly consent thus to be robbed, and I will resist."

"No, you won't."

"And why?"

"Because it will not be for your interest so to do. Besides, you are too rich and too liberal to refuse an old friend so trifling a favour."

"Trifling, did you say?"

"And, moreover," continued the traveller, "your place is so public here—nice house, well appointed, every thing pleasant and desirable; you wouldn't care to be inconvenienced by too frequent visits from certain friends I could name to you, and who wouldn't scruple to come and help themselves, perhaps, as you have done in times past, to whatever might be accessible?"

This last hint was delivered by the speaker with the coolest *sang-froid* imaginable; and the intruder filled his goblet once more, as the Count stared at him in utter astonishment.

"Bernardo — Donati, I mean," said the bold stranger, placing the goblet to his lips again, "your very good health!"

## CHAPTER XVI.

FRANCESCA DONATI—THE MAGICIAN.

WE have spoken of a pair of sparkling eyes which glistened through an opening in one of the drawing-room lattices when the stranger reached the piazza of Count Donati's house. They sit beneath the brow



of the renowned beauty of Genoa, Francesca Donati.

A finer form none knew ; a more captivating blonde and sweeter girl than the lovely and beloved Francesca found not her home in the neighbourhood of Genoa. She was sharp-witted, too, and joyous as a young fawn ; happy, contented, companionable, and friendly with all and to all around her ; and in the pride of glorious womanhood.

But Francesca was romantic, as well as sprightly and happy and beautiful. She saw the young stranger through the drawn blinds ; and though his attire was none of the best, and his person covered with dust, she conceived a strong desire to know more about him, and, woman-like, she listened to what he said before entering the house. For, despite his disguise, the heart of Francesca told her she had seen him before.

And who was this strange but haughty traveller ? and what was the secret he possessed, which had so extraordinary an effect upon the uniformly imperturbable and stoical old Count ? These were questions which at once suggested themselves to the nervous and excitable girl ; and she resolved to obtain some satisfactory answers to them. Nevertheless, Count Donati had no disposition to unravel any of this apparent mystery. On the contrary, he instantly made up his mind that Francesca should know nothing of the matter ; and he resolved also to get rid of his visitor at the very earliest possible moment.

“First of all, young man,” said Count Donati,

when they had become seated in the side-room to which they had retired,—“first of all, since you come with authority from Rodolpho, as you say you do, what is your name?”

“That matters very little, Count, surely, since my visit hither is purely upon business, and my stay must of necessity be limited. I am the agent of Rodolpho, and you have seen my badge of authority—which you do not question, of course?”

“By what right can Rodolpho thus attempt to filch me, and of such an enormous sum?”

“I did not ask him that. His orders were, ‘Go and seek Bernardo, now styled Count Donati, who dwells near Genoa. He is a gentleman of great wealth, and lives at his ease. I have befriended him in times past, and he knows me. Tell him I am in need of twenty thousand ducats at once, and must have so much. I helped to make him the fortune he now enjoys, and he knows it; he will not refuse you.’ I am only obeying his orders.”

“And what if I do refuse?”

“Then Rodolpho will come in person to see you.”

“Let him come, then.”

“What, Count! do I understand—”

“That I will not submit to such a demand.”

“It is but a loan.”

“I shall decline; I cannot do it.”

“Can, but will not, Count.”

“Construe it as you will. I am not disposed to embark in any such enterprise.”

“It is well, Count. I have finished my errand,

and will at once retire, if it please you, to order my horse. There is a long ride to accomplish between me and Rodolpho ; but I know the nature of his necessities just now, and he will await my return with anxiety. Since you refuse to respond to his request, too, I shall be the more in haste."

And with these words the traveller rose to depart. His steed was immediately ordered ; but when the animal reached the carriage-post, near the terrace, no one but the party well acquainted with the form and mettle of the beast would have suspected it to have been the same dust-covered animal which but an hour previously stood before the outer gate of the Count's mansion.

She was a magnificent Flemish mare, with a dash of Normandy blood in her veins ; all muscle, compactness, strength, and beauty. She had been well cared for and carefully groomed during the little time she had halted for her master's pleasure ; and when she was handed round to the door again, it was with difficulty the slave could control her. She pranced and danced and plunged in his hands, and would have disengaged herself altogether at last, but for a sharp voice that she suddenly heard behind her : "Hi, Peri ! hi !"

The beautiful creature quickly pointed her small thin ears towards the portal of the mansion, and, arching her full round neck, she responded to that well-known voice in a self-satisfied whinny, as if she would have said, could she have spoken, "Ah, master, I feared you were gone ;" and, on the instant, the sagacious Peri was as quiet as a lamb again.

"By St. Mark !" exclaimed Count Donati, glancing at the beautiful quadruped in readiness to be mounted, "you are borne by a fine steed ! I give you good day, young man ; and trust, if you ever have occasion to call again, that you will make your business not only more acceptable to me, but more profitable to yourself."

"Farewell, Sir Count," responded the young man cheerfully. "We shall meet again, be sure of it."

With this salutation, the stranger sprang into the saddle, and in a few moments was out of sight.

Notwithstanding the fact that the old Count returned again to his divan, and relighted his cigarette, he was evidently ill at ease after the interview. He knew Rodolpho, and he secretly feared him ; yet his cupidity prompted the course he had now chosen, and he determined to abide the result of his refusal to loan so much money, though his means were ample to accomplish an accommodation of five times the sum, at a moment's notice, if he desired so to do.

He tossed about uneasily till night fell, and then retired to his own private apartment in a very ill humour ; for he repented having been so peremptory and thoughtless, all things considered.

Francesca had heard the stranger's voice, she had seen his face, and she had become strangely interested in him at the first sight. She noted his sudden departure with reluctance, too ; but his graceful carriage, his fine form and manly beauty had left a deep impression. Besides, her heart whispered that it was no stranger, but her old lover, Count Claudio.

This lovely girl was generous-minded to a fault ; and she would have gone boldly to Count Donati, her protector, and asked the traveller's name and business ; but, for the first time, she observed that her old friend shunned her at evening, and she felt certain that he did not desire her to become acquainted with either one or the other. She kept her desire a secret, therefore, for a while, resolved, when the right opportunity presented, that she would satisfy herself on the subject.

On the third day subsequent to the visit we have described, all Genoa was alive with excitement in reference to the arrival of a distinguished necromancer—one Ferdinand Bletzer, as he called himself, a celebrated magician and juggler. His reputation had but recently preceded him in this place, but he was highly lauded, and his feats were said to be of the most singular and astounding character. While his performances were described as being highly entertaining and decorous, it was also stated that many of his feats were of a philosophical and interesting chemical character, such as had astonished the world wherever he had appeared thus far. His exhibitions, also, were conducted on a scale of magnificence, in appointments and appurtenances, such as has never before been witnessed ; and in his vocation, the Signior (who professed to be a Spaniard) was said to be altogether unrivalled.

Such a reputation, and such inducements for display, naturally stirred up the sluggish spirits of the inhabitants for the time being, and all Genoa went to witness the magical wonder of the age, who

had dropped in upon them in a moment when there was nothing astir in the town to compete with him. The nobility turned out *en masse* to witness the strange performances which had been so loudly talked of. When the curtain was drawn up at the Opera-house (which had been engaged for the exhibitions), a most aristocratic and select auditory greeted the *début* of the accomplished magician of Genoa.

When the talented juggler made his appearance in the midst of his sumptuous and costly surroundings, a deafening burst of enthusiasm and astonishment greeted him. He was superbly attired in the showy costume of an Eastern fakir, and his performances proved of the most wonderful and startling character. He was master of the "black art," evidently; and even in that superstitious, wizard-believing, wonder-loving community, he out-did all his predecessors in every species and grade of chicanery, sleight-of-hand, and legerdemain, to the utter astonishment and gratification of all who were fortunate enough to obtain an entrance to the theatre.

As we have stated, the stage was one mass of elegant and costly trappings, peculiarly adapted to the use of the great performer, from the magnificent polished-silver "mirror of fate," upon which the magician read the passing thoughts of any of his audience who dared to submit to the trial, down to the tiny golden thimble, less than an inch in depth, out of which he showered scores of bouquets and bon-bons, and the rarest of ripened fruit, among the ladies present.

Directly in front of the dress-circle a dais or platform had been arranged, on a level with the stage, extending around the entire circle of the parquette, to enable the performer to communicate directly with the aristocratic portion of the house, in order to extend the amusement and deceit of his tricks.

Among the foremost of the audience could be seen Count Donati, and his charming ward Francesca, who had come to the Opera-house to enjoy the treat afforded by the arrival of this extraordinary man, in common with the rest of the wonder-loving citizens of the town and vicinity.

The shrewd and watchful eye of Naomi was fixed at an early moment upon the magician, and she watched him with an ardent and determined gaze during the whole evening ; yet she saw nothing, or very little, of his performances. She saw the man, however, and her thoughts were busy meantime ; for they had met before.

The selfish old Count knew nothing of this, however, nor did he suspect any thing. The philosophy of the diversion was Greek to him ; the sleight-of-hand appeared to his vision to be the science of art ; the choicest efforts of the juggler were astounding truths in his esteem ; and he had no leisure, except to be duped and amused at the same time.

More than once, however, the magician had approached the little coterie who surrounded the fair Francesca, and drawn from one or another of the ladies a glove, a kerchief, or a ring, with which to make experiments ; and, as the performance con-

tinued, the Count's ward became more and more deeply interested in the countenance of the wonderful man who amused them, albeit none knew why or wherefore.

Trick after trick, feat after feat, had been accomplished, to the satisfaction and surprise of the vast audience ; and as the evening closed, the magician had possessed himself of a diamond ring and glove from Francesca Donati to complete an experiment. After which, he returned the latter to its lovely owner, but not the ring. Upon attempting to replace the glove upon her hand, she discovered an impediment within the palm, and upon a more critical examination, which no one else had observed, she found a diminutive envelope in the glove, which startled her at first, but which, on a moment's reflection, she determined to say nothing about. It probably contained her ring,—or he would immediately return the jewel, at any rate ; and so the time passed by.

The magician was busy, the audience admired and applauded, the evening waned, and every body forgot the circumstance of the ring save its fair owner.

No one was better pleased than Count Donati, though his eyesight was none of the best, having suffered with a visual complaint for some time previously. However, he was delighted, the audience generally were delighted, and Francesca, who had scarcely noted the details of a single feat distinctly, was quite as much pleased with her visit as the rest.

The company saw the curtain fall with regret ; and the superior foil-performances of the Signior



drew together crowds upon crowds thereafter for several days.

Naomi said nothing of the missing ring ; but, on reaching home, she lost no time in retiring to her own boudoir, to learn further particulars in reference to this romantic episode, satisfied of what no other person in attendance at the Opera-house could be,—to wit, that she had met with Signior Bletzer before, under other circumstances.

---

## CHAPTER XVII.

### THE CONTENTS OF THE GLOVE—A SURPRISE.

No greater truism was ever yet promulgated than the time-worn adage that “love is blind.” Francesca the beautiful was near the verge of being in love ; but Francesca, though not exactly blind, was now very near-sighted in this particular. Notwithstanding this, she had discovered what the old Count had never dreamed of, though his opportunity had never been fully equal,—to wit, that the magician and the mysterious visitor at Donati’s mansion but a few days previously were one and the same individual. So, of a truth, Love is not always so blind as he is described to be.

Upon reaching her boudoir, Francesca dispensed with the usual services of her *femme de chambre*; for her curiosity had reached its culminating point, and she was in a state of feverish excitement to know what were the contents of the glove. Securing her-

self from interruption by dropping the latchet of her door when her attendant retired, she quickly drew from its hiding-place the treasured missive.

What was it? Did the packet contain her missing ring? Most certainly it ought. But, alack, no jewel was there. It was a very jewel of—an envelope, with gilded edge and deep embossings of darling Cupids, doves, and roses; and then the seal a crest! What could all this mean? It was a very impertinent thing, this smuggling a *billet-doux* into a lady's very glove, unasked and unexpected. But Francesca only smiled, though she asked herself all these questions, and with a trembling hand removed the seal. The contents of the note she quickly mastered. It was without date, and ran as follows:

“FAIR LADY,—Believe me at your feet to crave pardon for this intrusion, which may be, haply, fatal to my hopes. I love you, Francesca, with all the fervour and purity of a devoted, unquenchable love; and I have dared to tell you so. If the opportunity be afforded me, I will explain to you in person all that I am, all that I feel, all that I can ever aim to be, in life.

“The poor *ruse* I have resorted to, to engage your attention for one moment (that I might thus tell you in one word my ambition and my hopes), may fail of its object. You may be shocked, perhaps, at audacity like this, and turn away with a sensation of contempt for him who should be guilty of such monstrous presumption.

“But, lady, do not judge me harshly. We have

already met. Let me say again, with all my heart's truest devotion, *I love you* ; and be this the excuse for my daring. I have prepared these hasty lines,—which I shall make sure will reach you,—and in exchange I shall retain some trifling memento which may fall into my hands from yours to-night.

“Tell me if I shall sue in vain. Your reappearance at the Opera-house shall be my answer. We can meet there unknown to all save our own hearts ; and peradventure I shall find *in the glove I may solicit from you again* your reply to this ?

“Devotedly yours,

“THE MAGICIAN.”

Now, under ordinary circumstances this letter would have either found its way quickly to Count Donati, or the young lady would have crushed or burnt it, with a sneer for its author. But as it was, there was altogether too much of romance in this affair to admit of either course—so thought Francesca ; and while her little heart fluttered wildly in her bosom, she pressed the letter to her lips in very rapture. Strange, inexplicable, and unexplainable is the course of love !

While this scene was passing in the private apartment of fair Francesca, old Count Donati had retired for the night. He was not a little superstitious, albeit his former life had been a scene, for many a year, of danger and toil and crime, which might well have operated, one would suppose, towards eradicating any thing like such a sentiment in his composition. But Count Donati slept, after witnessing what had

been to him the most astounding series of performances he had ever seen; and the wealthy Italian dreamed.

The conjuror appeared before him as he slept, and he fancied that he assumed a thousand different shapes, each distinct from the other, and each more appalling and forbidding than the first. In his slumbers he went back to "days long past," and the magician still was present, pursuing him, glaring upon him with great fiery eyes, taunting him with reminiscences of the times when a price was offered for his head. Then the juggler would laugh at and deride him, and point him to a form that followed close behind, and which, upon a further examination, proved to be Rodolpho, who threatened him. Count Donati tossed heavily upon his pillow, and would have screamed for aid, but he had not the power. His tongue refused to articulate; the power of the magician was upon him.

The rays of the clear young moon illumined his chamber, and, after a fitful struggle, the old Italian turned upon his side, and his thoughts quickly flew again to his dwelling near Genoa. He struggled to forget what he had just passed through; he essayed to blot from his brain the effects of his dream, still unfinished; and with a determined effort he sprang from his pillow, to encounter, instead of the ideal, the reality. Rodolpho stood beside his couch!

"Avaunt!" shouted the Count wildly, not knowing certainly if he were actually asleep or awake; but the palm of the sinewy Rodolpho was quickly

placed upon the Count's mouth, and silence as quickly succeeded the Italian noble's exclamation.

"Hist, Bernardo !" said the robber softly.

"Donati," said the Italian.

"I know you only as Bernardo," continued the powerful man at his bedside ; "and I charge you to be silent if you value your life."

"In the name of all the saints," muttered Count Donati, as he shivered with fright and excitement, "how came you here, and when?"

"It matters not ; suffice it that I am here, and that I am needy."

"Well, old friend—"

"Stop there," said Rodolpho coldly, "and listen first to what I have to offer." And with these words the robber poised a glistening pistol in his right hand, and then released his hold upon his old companion's person.

"When we parted company, now two years ago," continued the robber, in a low but firm voice, "you will not have forgotten who took from the wealth of our little clan the lion's share of the spoils we had accumulated."

"We who aided to—"

"Hist, Bernardo, and listen, for my visit hither must be brief. I say, you cannot have forgotten who awarded himself the lion's portion, and retired from the profession at that time. You will also remember the few brief words that passed, on that occasion, between the 'leader' and his 'lieutenant,' who had brought about the resignation of the first personage, at that individual's own request ; and the promise—

the voluntary promise—which was then proffered by the retiring ‘captain.’ These two items must still be fresh in your memory, I think, though two long years have now passed since their occurrence.”

“I remember no prom—”

“You are a liar, Bernardo, and, but that I had the means ready at my call—even from that very window yonder, through which I found my way to your bedside—to compel you to disgorge, I would be avenged on you here,—upon this spot,—for your denial of my words, and your base ingratitude.”

“You take me thus at disadvantage.”

“Disadvantage! Bah! do you think I would act otherwise under the circumstances of the case? Bernardo, you know me. You know whether Count Claudio is a liar, a coward, or an ingrate. We have stood side by side, shoulder to shoulder, in many a rough skirmish in days long passed by. And I say, you know whether I am usually successful in my undertakings.”

“Go,—what must I do?”

“When we thus parted, Bernardo, the jewels, plate, and gold you bore away were ample to furnish means to support you munificently for life. You then said, ‘Rodolpho, count on me ever. I will be your friend. You have been true as steel, and, but for you, I should not have been able to tear myself from the men and this course of life, of which I am heartily sick. Take my place. It is a hazardous one; but you are equal to it. Whenever you need my aid, do not hesitate to command me,—to the

uttermost of the means which you have so bravely helped to place in my hands.' Such were your words, Bernardo. Am I right or wrong?" he asked, at the same time springing back the lock of the pistol, the click of which did not sound very musical at midnight in the ears of the once reckless and bold, but just now excited and alarmed, Italian.

"A promise then made—" began Count Donati.

"Am I right or wrong?" insisted Count Claudio, interrupting him, and pointing the weapon straight into his eye.

"Hold!" said the Count, "and hear me one moment."

"I have no time or inclination. In my worst extremity, when upon the very verge of starvation comparatively, with our band routed and our means of supply cut off, I sent to you for a loan—a simple loan—to aid me in utter necessity, and not till then; and you abuse my messenger, and falsify your own promise. Now, ingrate that you are, show me your strong-box. Point me to your hoarded gold, that I may help myself as I will, or, by St. Paul, your life is not worth a rush!"

"Beware!" exclaimed the old Count wildly.

"I am in earnest," continued the robber, "and, I will tell you again, my plan is laid with caution. The snarling hounds that yelped at our approach here lie with their throats cut at your portal. Your house is surrounded at every point with my followers. You shall not escape. Up, then, and redeem your promise, or take the consequences of your refusal! Your mansion shall be stripped and sacked, and not

a soul within its walls shall live to tell the story. Quick, too ; for the morning is approaching."

"I am at your mercy."

"You placed yourself there."

"How much money—gold—will satisfy you?"

"To-night, ten thousand ducats."

"You shall have the amount."

"And within three days, the second ten thousand."

"I may not be able—"

"Pshaw ! you must."

"Be it so, then. And does this satisfy you once and for all?"

"I make no further terms. Give me the gold, and on the third day hence my messenger will wait on you for the other."

"I comprehend."

"And you will treat with him honestly too?"

"Yes," said the Count.

"If not, it will be the worse for you, remember."

The first instalment was immediately furnished ; and half an hour afterwards the tramping of twenty horses was heard beyond the gates, as the marauding band, headed by Count Claudio, left the premises, and dashed away in the darkness.

---



## CHAPTER XVIII.

## “WAIT AND HOPE.”

THE scene which we have sketched in the preceding chapter was conducted very quietly from the start. On reaching the villa, Rodolpho took care, first of all, to stop the alarm by killing the hounds outside. Having previously made himself acquainted with the premises by bribing one of the slaves, he found little difficulty in securing the three or four men-servants; and then, posting his companions, he forced the window of the old Count's sleeping-room, at the opposite wing to that occupied by Francesca, when his scheme was quickly and successfully completed, as we have seen, without disturbing the other inmates of the dwelling.

Francesca Donati slept soundly and sweetly. She, too, dreamed that a conquest had been made. She saw in her slumbers, not the image of the accomplished necromancer who had so delighted the vast auditory on the preceding evening, but she was wandering in a sweet grove beside the stranger who had been so rudely treated at Donati's gate. She leaned upon his arm, and heard his voice—low, soft, and musical—as he poured into her willing ear the protestations of a lover. She started from that happy illusion, and awoke; for she thought on a sudden that she heard the stern voice of Count Donati in the distance. She opened her eyes; but the moon was just sinking gently down into the

west, and she found that her hand still pressed the gilt-edged note which had so mysteriously reached her.

Again she slumbered, and again the same form, the same handsome features, waited on her dream. In the vine-covered arbour of Count Donati's garden, whither she was wont to retire daily, she thought she sat and listened again to the gentle and tender asseverations of the stranger, who swore eternal devotion and truth to her,—ah, it was a happy delusion!—and she suffered him to raise her hand to his lips. But the sweet dream passed on, and Francesca the beautiful awoke : it was morning.

Count Donati had very good cause to observe a profound secrecy in reference to the part he had been forced to play in the scene of the night just passed. The reminiscences which had been called up in the course of his brief interview with the leader of the robber-gang were too truthful and too suspicious to permit of his making mention of the affair a second time, if the thing could be avoided. Through the contrivance of the treacherous servant whom Rodolpho had bribed, the rest of the attendants of Count Donati had enjoyed the evening right merrily over tankards of choice wine, and ere midnight came they were “deep in their cups.” They had an indistinct recollection of being attacked, threatened, and gagged subsequently ; but when morning came, and no serious damage appeared to have occurred from the visit of what they believed to have been a party of robbers, each man kept his own counsel, lest he should expose himself to ridicule. The two

dead hounds were put out of sight, therefore ; and no questions being asked by any one, no one had to answer for the disturbance.

The magician continued his stay in Genoa, and on the night of his performance Count Donati was again induced, through the appeals of his ward, to pay a second visit, accompanied by her, to the Opera-house.

Previous to leaving her boudoir on the evening they were again to visit the Opera-house, the lovely Francesca exhibited more than ordinary care in the adjustment of her dress and her final toilet. The brilliant necklace which clasped her ample throat never rested upon a fairer figure ; the diamonds which sparkled from her flashing tiara were not more brilliant than the wearer's piercing eyes ; the pure white-satin robe which was so gracefully looped with costly jewels at her bosom and shoulders was not whiter or clearer than her alabaster skin. The ripe bloom of health and maturing beauty was upon her round, full face, and she was happy—very happy ; for she looked with favour upon the advances of the stranger, who yet was not a stranger.

Within the small white glove was hidden an envelope : that cover contained a perfumed note ; upon its white page was written three little words only, without signature, without date. This note was addressed to "*The Wizard*," and the words were, "*Wait and hope*."

This expressive missive was carefully concealed, and the old Count appeared with his captivating and lovely ward, in due time, at the Opera-house.

Every seat was occupied ; but directions had been given, so that in the event of the Count's application for places, they could readily be obtained. The ring had remained in the wizard's hands uncalled for ; and he felt sure that its fair owner had at least taken no umbrage at his proposal, from the fact that the jewel had not been claimed.

The stranger's joy was silent but intense when the curtain rose at length, and the eye of the magician fell upon the looked-for object. Francesca was there ! He saw her in her proudest attire, in her most bewitching *ensemble*, and he felt that his suit had not been offensive to her. She could not but have found his letter, and he should get a reply to it. Ah, how anxiously did he watch for some token of recognition from that fair face ! and how weary were the passing moments, even amidst his rapid experiments, that intervened between him and the proper opportunity to solicit the loan of that glove once more !

A wild *bravo* of hearty Italian welcome greeted the astonishing and graceful performer when he appeared ; and during the cheering and continued plaudits which preceded his commencement of operations for the evening, he recovered the self-possession which momentarily deserted him, under the circumstances, when he made his entrance. Quiet was restored at last, and the *divertissement* proceeded. The kerchiefs, the bracelets, the rings of the ladies, and the watches and pocket-coins of the gentlemen, were brought into requisition in rapid succession for the performance of various tricks

The broad stage was alive with doves and paroquets and *petites* animals that had risen from the earth, or been created apparently in the air, at the magician's call ; scores of massive and elegant bouquets of flowers were called from his vesture for general distribution ; vase upon vase of the rarest fruits were produced from his tiny "magic thimble," which he stood directly in front of the stage ; and a lady's glove was at last desired by the adroit and accomplished professor.

A score of outstretched hands were instantly presented, from which, with easy gracefulness, the necromancer made his choice ; and retiring to the stage, he bore with him the delicate glove of Francesca Donati, the Italian's ward. The experiment was simple but beautiful. The magician placed the glove upon a vase of living coals ; and the audience, some with surprise, others with solid amusement, saw it quickly crisped and burned to a cinder before their eyes. The ashes, however, were as quickly and carefully collected by the magician, who placed the smoky and blackened ruins upon a clean silver salver. This he placed upon a small table near the footlights, and then apologised in broken Italian for having destroyed the lady's glove. Nevertheless, he declared his willingness to make some amends for the mishap ; and forthwith commenced an unintelligible incantation over the ashes. Immediately a wreath of bright blue smoke was seen to rise directly from the centre of the salver ; and as the attentive auditory watched, a bud succeeded, then a blossom, and as it slowly rose from the surface of

the dish, a pure white flower grew out from the stem, which at last expanded into full bloom. A shout of delight followed this demonstration, in the midst of which another bud appeared. The wizard waited a moment, and then advancing to the table, he gently opened the last-named blossom, and from out its centre, seemingly, there flew a magnificent dove, which hovered over the table an instant, and then alighted on the magician's shoulder. Around its neck there hung a silken cord, and depending from it was a diminutive package scarcely two inches in length. The heart of Francesca leaped in her bosom fitfully; for she recognised, or thought she did, *instantly* the little packet she had intrusted to the stranger's honour! But the gentle bird perched on its master's hand at the word, and advancing to the dress circle, he presented the dove to Francesca, and begged her to open the packet which hung upon its neck. She did so tremblingly and abashed, when, lo! compressed within the folds of the little envelope, unstained and perfect, she discovered her missing glove! A thousand *bravos* succeeded this feat; the dove flew to the stage; the wizard retired; and the curtain fell amidst tumultuous applause.

Ere the laughter and noisy approbation had ceased, the wizard was alone in his private apartment. He had secured the little treasure intended for him, and he saw in its superscription the delicate tracings of a lady's handwriting. Ah, how did his heart leap again, while he broke the seal of that note! Its contents were quickly devoured. There appeared no date, no signature; but he was half

delirious with joy and satisfaction. It was enough ! Francesca had deigned to reply to his burning and hastily-prepared missive of love ! The past was forgiven ! He felt nothing, asked nothing, thought of nothing but the magic words which glistened on the page before him—" *Wait and hope !*" He pressed the tiny letter to his lips, and danced for very joy, as he exclaimed, again and again:

"Sweet Francesca, I am content to *wait and hope !*"

---

## CHAPTER XIX.

### COUNTS DONATI AND CLAUDIO, THE BANDIT-CHIEFS.

AT a distance of some sixty leagues from Genoa, to the north-west, there is a long and badly-cultivated strip of country, which for centuries has been the dwelling-place and resort of numerous bands of adventurers, highwaymen, bandits, and freebooters ; and this region, from its peculiarity of location and the general face of the country, seems to have been pitched upon by these hordes of robbers as especially suited to, and intended for, their purposes of retreat and rendezvous.

Some two years prior to the period of which we have now written, there was one clan more formidable than the rest, considerably larger than the average of the bands which roved among the passes and hills of the district we have described, and which had for a long period, in spite of the best efforts

of the Austrian and Northern-Italian governments, infested the neighbourhood, to the great annoyance and distress of travellers, and the damage of the peaceably-inclined inhabitants upon the valley-borders.

The efforts of the Italian minister of police had been entirely ineffectual in routing this gang ; and the soldiery had also been as unsuccessful in the same object. Minor clans had been dispersed or destroyed ; but the followers of the noted and every where dreaded Bernardo were invincible. The fortunes of this band had been very favourable, too ; and their numerous expeditions, at home and abroad, in the highway or in the byway, had been marvellously successful. Their enterprises had usually been thoroughly planned ; and the booty they sought or coveted had almost uniformly fallen into their hands sooner or later.

The character of the then leader of the tribe, the notorious Bernardo, was the most singular compound of laziness and cunning, of adroit managing faculty and consummate indolence, at times, that could, by any ingenuity of reasoning, be conceived. He could sit in his palace, or a grotto, surrounded, as he always was, with every luxury that could possibly conduce to his comfort and ease, and there he would leisurely concoct his plans and undertakings, which would almost invariably prove the most profitable to himself and followers. He was thoroughly acquainted with the whole range of country far and near, and he could thus direct his operations from any stated point with ease and facility. His success was unbounded, therefore ; and his natural indolence



increased as he grew more and more wealthy in his advancing years.

At length he tired of the life he had led so long ; and after a few hints to his clan, touching upon his future interests, he at last informed them that he had determined to abdicate, and to retire altogether from the dangers and the turmoil of the profession. His proposition was smiled at, at first ; but his men soon learned to believe that he was in earnest ; and finally he gathered his followers together, had an estimate made of all the possessions of the tribe, contrived very shrewdly to seize upon the most valuable and most portable treasure, and appropriating to himself one-third of the valuables, he distributed the balance among his men, appointed his successor, and quitted the mountains for ever.

When Bernardo named his successor, or rather when the retiring captain proposed to those who had so long shared his fortune the name of his lieutenant, Rodolpho, a unanimous shout of hearty welcome greeted the gallant fellow who was thus honoured with the distinction. There was no grumbling at this preference, no dissentient voices, no opposition ; for every man of this strong band knew Rodolpho, and most of them were rejoiced at the change, which they deemed for the better.

“Long live our captain ! long live Rodolpho !” was the instantaneous cry of the whole band ; and Rodolpho, who readily accepted the post, responded briefly but pointedly to the generous reception thus accorded to him.

“Comrades,” he said, “you do me honour. I

am more than gratified, since our brave leader will retire, to accept the station you offer me. Our fortunes are equal. You may rely on me ever. Continue to be bold and brave ; be true to yourselves and to me, and your captain shall never be found wanting."

"Hurrah ! hurrah for Captain Rodolpho ! Long live our young and noble captain !" responded the men heartily.

The new leader was forthwith installed ; and Bernardo prepared to depart at once. An escort was provided him to the borders of civilisation. Rodolpho led the van from that hour.

Upon reaching the frontier, two days afterwards, the former chief shook hands with each man separately ; and at last the parting moment came. He took the hand of his late lieutenant, and after thanking the men for their truthful devotion to himself, he complimented the newly-chosen leader, and said :

"Rodolpho, we have climbed many a dangerous rampart together, and I have always found you a *whole man*. Count on me hereafter as your friend. Take my place ; you are worthy of it. If ever you should need any aid at my hands, command me to the uttermost of the means I possess, and which you have so nobly aided to place in my possession. Adieu ! may you ever be happy, and always successful !"

They parted. The band returned to their quarters ; and matters progressed advantageously for a considerable period afterwards.

Months rolled by, however, and the numerous startling and infamous robberies which had been committed had at last reached to such an extent, that a large military force was despatched to the mountains, for the purpose of breaking up the rendezvous of the hordes of banditti that had gathered there. Success, in a measure, crowned the final efforts of the soldiery ; and the robbers, for the greater part, were, for the time being, destroyed or dispersed. One unsuccessful enterprise after another followed the fortunes of Rodolpho and his band, until at last they were greatly reduced in numbers, and were well shorn of their ill-gotten gains.

In the mean time, Bernardo, the former brigand-chief, visited Paris, where he had a few relatives in the middle walks of life. He pretended to have been engaged in business at several points on the Continent ; and as nobody knew much about his previous life in any way, he was required to answer but few questions. Moreover, his purse was plainly well filled ; and a goodly display of gold, it is generally known, will "cover a multitude of sins." His real name was, as the reader knows, Donati, and he was of Italian origin. He had been reared and lived as a nobleman ; but, from causes with which the reader is acquainted, he took to a lawless life. Once in the mountains, he contrived, through his natural cunning and general good sense, to amass a large amount of money and valuables, which he secreted or took away with him finally, and soon converted into *l'argent*.

During his sojourn in Paris, Bernardo became

the sole guardian and protector of a young and beautiful lady. None, not even his most intimate friends, knew who or what she was. To some he declared she was his daughter ; to others he only laughed, and declared she was a near relation. She was brought to him by a veiled lady, who appeared in deep grief. This lady took a sorrowful farewell of the girl, and immediately left Paris and was seen no more. She held no discourse with Count Donati, but left immediately after consigning the girl to him. Francesca—for such, as the reader doubtless guesses, the young lady was called—was beautiful, well-educated, and altogether a charming girl. She knew now, as did Bernardo, *alias* the Count Donati, that she was not his daughter. He loaded her with costly jewelry and fine clothes, and at last took her from her more immediate friends, upon a tour, as he averred, of Europe. Flattered by his kind words, tempted by his show of wealth, and desirous of making such a journey withal, she consented to join him, without the slightest suspicions as to his ultimate plans or object regarding his own destination or her weal.

They accomplished their journey at last ; and at the expiration of six months the young girl found herself domiciliated at the beautiful villa of Count Donati—her guardian's permanent residence—at Genoa. She was surrounded with luxury in her new home, and soon came to be contented with the change. At the time we meet her, subsequently, at the dwelling of the old Count, she was upwards of twenty years of age.

To return for a moment to the fortunes of Count Claudio. As we have said, during this period of two years, he had at last met with reverses ; and finding his former captain and friend, he resolved to try his generosity, and put his promise to a test.

Rodolpho had been Bernardo's favourite pupil. Of all the men he had ever met, the former chief often declared that no one ever equalled the young lieutenant in cunning, tact, and genuine diplomacy. He was sparely built ; but his frame was seemingly made up of sinews. His muscular strength was very extraordinary ; his perception was exceedingly acute ; his address very pleasing ; his readiness at every species of deception astonishing ; and his power of impersonating the conduct and character and bearing of other people was most unaccountable. In his disguises he was inimitable ; and for ready tact in emergency Bernardo had never found the man who could approach him. With his history prior to his joining the band in the mountains, the reader is already acquainted ; but no one could ever elicit any particulars of his past life.

Such, then, was the man whom the former chief of the robbers had now to deal with, after a separation from him and his associations for nearly two years.

Count Donati was always an avaricious and a selfish man. Within the last two years, since his gains had been converted into solid coin and tangible securities, he had grown more avaricious, more selfish, more close-fisted than ever. He lived for his own personal aggrandisement and his own com-

fort, and at this time was a man of great worldly wealth ; for his investments had turned out immensely profitable, and his current expenses had constantly been kept within very moderate bounds. The purpose of his heart was *to wed his ward*, whom people once supposed to be his daughter, the beautiful Naomi, himself ; and to that purpose all his cunning and energies had long been directed.

At the most inopportune of all moments for his interest and designs, the messenger of Count Claudio waited upon him for pecuniary aid. His refusal to acknowledge the claim of his old associate had brought Rodolpho himself to his very bedside. He had, perforce, paid the young robber-captain ten thousand ducats in bright yellow gold, and his demand was but now half satisfied.

The morning of the third day succeeding the terrible midnight interview between him and Rodolpho had now arrived ; and, as yet, Count Donati had come to no conclusion as to what he should do when called upon for the remainder of his former companion's claim.

The hours passed rapidly by, and evening was approaching at last ; but the messenger of Count Claudio had not yet made his appearance.

---

## CHAPTER XX.

## THE CONFERENCE—A NEW FACE.

LATE in the afternoon of the third day the same superb horse which had borne the messenger of Count Claudio some days previously dashed suddenly down the road, and passed the outer gate. Halting beyond the *hacienda* of Donati, who sat on his piazza himself, and saw every movement of the traveller, the rider took from his breast a paper, which he examined, and then turning his steed, he came slowly back.

Having ridden up to the terrace-steps, he inquired, in a low and modest tone of voice, if one Count Donati dwelt there. Upon receiving an answer in the affirmative, he alighted, handed the reins to the slave in waiting, and approached the lordly proprietor, who received him with marked and chilling coldness. As the selfish Count Donati turned towards him, however, the colour fled from the Italian's face, and he had no words for utterance.

"Have I the pleasure of speaking to the proprietor of this fair residence?" asked the traveller, advancing to the old Count's side.

"S'dearth!" exclaimed Donati. "Am I deceived?"

"I think not," responded the stranger calmly.

"You are from Rodolpho?"

"I am Count Claudio," continued the traveller,

in the same modest and quiet tone ; “ a gentleman you were formerly acquainted with, I think.”

“ Yes, yes,” said Count Donati, quickly rising ; “ I see ; yes ; come in—come in—this way, Count.”

Now Donati had not the most remote suspicion that Rodolpho would first call upon him in person : he supposed that his messenger would come, when he hoped to make out a case of evasion, and compromise the matter. So, when he beheld Count Claudio before him, his thoughts turned to the bedroom interview, and he was not prepared to speak with Rodolpho himself. Forgetting what he was doing, therefore, in his excitement, he advanced at once to the reception-room, instead of preceding his visitor, as he intended to do, to his private parlour ; and ere he could recover from the mistake, he found himself in the presence of his ward, the lovely Francesca.

The fair lady arose, and curtseyed with grace, as Count Donati bunglingly said, “ My friend, Signior Rodolpho—Signior, my ward.”

That was a happy circumstance for at least one heart ! The visitor at once entered into easy conversation ; and his peculiarly agreeable manners had the effect of restoring the disturbed nerves of the Count in a measure, who soon afterwards asked Francesca to excuse him—and with his guest he retired to transact some pressing matters of business in his library.

As the stranger rose to go, he took the hand of Francesca in his own, and said, “ Good night, lady ! ” only—when a thrill shot through her frame, on



the instant, and she staggered back, nearly fainting, to the couch as they departed. This incident was unobserved by Count Donati; but the effect was not lost sight of by his friend, Signior Rodolpho, who said nothing, however, but followed his former leader into his private apartment.

"Now, Rodolpho."

"Now, Bernardo," quickly responded his guest.

"Donati here," suggested the old Count coldly.

"Donati, then, or Bernardo, or whatever you will, so that I am not detained here for want of the gold you promised."

"But you said you would send a messenger?"

"I thought better of it, and came myself."

"I have thought better of my promise."

"And what do you decide upon?"

"That I cannot submit to your demands."

"What if I increase the amount?"

"What!" exclaimed the Count, enraged. "Would you rob me of every ducat?"

"No, good Count Donati, no; I have only asked the loan of twenty thousand ducats—one half of which I have received of you. But, Count, my time is money; and you have unnecessarily delayed my schemes; so I shall charge you for the detention. Give me, then, twenty thousand ducats, in addition to what I have received, and I cry quits with you,—not else, however, by St. Mark!"

"Never!" cried Donati; "never will I submit to such extortion."

"Extortion! Come, I do not like such words. Who put this gold within your grasp? Who aided

and backed you in your plans to gain what you enjoy? Who risked his life and limbs hundreds of times to defend and enrich Bernardo, now the lordly Donati?"

Count Donati was silent; for the old days came back to his memory when he had been in worse predicaments than this, and had contrived to escape unscathed. His mind, which had been inactive for many a long month, was now glancing at the chances in his favour in this uncomfortable emergency, and he made no reply.

He had already parted with ten thousand ducats. The price of silence on the part of Rodolpho for the present only, was now twenty thousand more. This was too much. He determined not to pay it. When this was obtained, he saw that he was just as much in the power of Count Claudio for evil as ever; and he would avoid the pecuniary penalty.

The lion was roused. The cunning of Count Donati, which had lain dormant for years, since there had been no occasion for its exercise, was once more in active motion within him; and he very quickly decided upon his future course in the matter.

Turning again to Rodolpho, he said, "At least, Count Claudio, you must afford me time to obtain this money."

"Bah!" replied Rodolpho, at once, "would you attempt such trifling with me, Bernardo? Think you that I shall give you time and leisure to betray me, instead of fulfilling your promise? No, no!"

The countenance of Count Donati fell; for he

was guilty in his own heart ; but he quickly rallied, and asked with some feeling :

“ Did I ever betray you, Rodolpho ? ”

“ No, Bernardo ; because you never had motive so to do. Circumstances are now reversed.”

“ And you dare not trust me ? ”

“ I do not fear you, Bernardo ; but I cannot delay this matter. My engagements are peremptory.”

“ I must have time.”

“ How much will accommodate you, then ? ”

“ Until to-morrow,” said Donati slowly.

“ At what hour to-morrow ? ”

“ At noon.”

“ You are in earnest, then, and will not play me false ? ” continued Rodolpho, looking into his eyes curiously.

“ You may rely on me.”

“ Twenty thousand ducats in Italian gold, at noon to-morrow ? ”

“ Yes, on my honour.”

“ It is well ; I agree to that.”

“ In the mean time,” continued Donati calmly, “ be my guest. I shall negotiate the money through a friend ; I will not leave you alone here, lest you may suspect my intentions.”

“ Enough,” said Rodolpho ; “ I think I may venture to trust you. But, mark me, I must not be deceived. To-morrow, at the hour of noon, the gold must be forthcoming ; and if your evil genius should suggest to you, in the interim, to do me injury or play the knave, again beware ! For I swear to you,

Bernardo, I will not—cannot—now be balked. If you will provide this money, I tell you, on my honour, it shall be returned to you. If you relent and aim to entrap me, your house shall be sacked, and your head shall pay the forfeit for your perfidy, within the week ensuing. Do we understand each other?"

"There is no need of threats, Rodolpho; I have determined on my course."

These were Donati's final words; and shortly afterwards the traveller, who declared he was weary with his long journey, partook of a goblet of wine and some dried fruit, and was shown to his sleeping apartment.

Rodolpho said, "Good night, Count," when the slave appeared at the door to conduct him to his room; but Donati only moved his head as the former retired.

The once robber-chief, now the lordly owner of uncounted thousands, the depraved and wicked-hearted Bernardo, sat alone in his library half an hour afterwards, with his head resting between his hands, and his dim but vicious eyes glaring fearfully at vacancy as he meditated.

"He has made his last seizure," muttered Bernardo mentally, as he sat there with the cold drops of perspiration trickling through his trembling and extended hands; "he has drunk his last cup of wine; he has ridden the last journey he will ever ride in this world! Fool that he is! Does he forget that I am Bernardo—that I was Bernardo? Well, he may as well die, as that I should starve. Thirty thousand ducats! He must pay for his temerity. I am equal to it yet. Rodolpho will go hence no more!"

Such was the Italian's resolve ; and though he did not care to have the blood of a companion upon his hands, yet he loved his wealth too well to shower gold in thousands upon friend or foe. He determined to remain in his private apartment, and, when all was still, he would steal to the chamber of his guest, and despatch him as he slept. His purse of gold might easily be placed under the pillow of one of his slaves, and that would exonerate him from suspicion ; and throwing himself back in his *easy-chair*, for the time being the hardened robber actually slept.

While this diabolical plan was being matured in the mind of Count Donati, the stranger was busy in his chamber. Seating himself at a table, he drew from his breast a stiletto, which he placed before him ; and then turning to his coat-pocket, he secured a double-barrelled pistol, the priming of which he scrutinised with more than ordinary caution. Then, taking out his watch, he glanced at it, and placing his light against the lower pane of glass in his window, he waited anxiously for the hand to point to the hour of twelve o'clock. The signal had been previously agreed upon ; and Rodolpho awaited the arrival of a confidant at that hour, who was to furnish him with a ladder by which to descend from his chamber ; for he had an appointment, which Count Donati little dreamed of. Rodolpho did not suspect the intentions of Bernardo towards him ; but he nevertheless prepared himself, and he always did, for contingencies. He believed that Count Donati slumbered ; and he hoped to obtain his gold on the fol-

lowing day. Little did he surmise **what was** in store for him within the next few hours.

Bernardo continued to doze in his chair. The dogs had been destroyed already. Francesca had retired to her boudoir, but sleep was farthest from her eyelids. The old German clock in the great hall of the house struck the midnight hour, and a low whistle was quickly heard below the traveller's window.

In an instant the light was extinguished, the sash was softly raised, a ladder fell against the wall, and Count Claudio descended safely to the ground.

"Now, Pierre," he said, "the guitar."

"It is here, Captain."

"Good. Retire, Pierre ; but remain within call."

The attendant fell back, and Rodolpho disappeared alone beneath the shadow of the mansion.

---

## CHAPTER XXI.

### THE NIGHT'S EVENTS.

WHEN Count Claudio took leave of Francesca before he retired, it will be recollected that an unusual emotion was suddenly exhibited by that lady, who, as he went out, staggered back in astonishment at a discovery she suddenly made. It was a singular fact ; but as he presented his hand to her, she saw upon his finger *her diamond ring* ; and when the door closed behind him as he went out, she discovered also a small note in her hand, superscribed in the

same handwriting that a previous one had been, and which was directed to herself.

Both these circumstances were curious, but both of them were quickly unravelled as Naomi opened the note, and read as follows :

“CHARMING LADY,—Be not surprised that the humble magician should resort to such a *ruse* as this to communicate with you, after your kind response to his first appeal.

“Ah, lady, you cannot conceive the joy which that brief sentence has created in the stranger’s heart. We had met before, and you will not have forgotten Claudio, who years ago had the misfortune to fall under your displeasure ; nor him, perhaps, who had the honour of meeting you, at an opportune moment, when your personal safety was endangered.

“The poor necromancer, the dusty traveller, your fortunate deliverer from peril, and Count Claudio, are one and the same person. Do not start at this announcement ; all shall be satisfactorily explained to you. In your palm-grove, near your own favourite arbour, grant me an interview with you to-night. Trust all to the honour of him who loves you with adoration, and know me only for the present as

“Yours devotedly,

“RODOLPHO.”

Thrice did Francesca peruse that singular note ; and as its contents were being digested in her mind, she could scarcely bring herself to realise that the half of it was true. She had not forgotten the gal-

lant service that some one had rendered her a few days previously during a morning ride, when her horse had become unmanageable, and her servant was not in attendance as usual upon her. She remembered that act with the deepest gratitude ; and, when she complimented the gentleman who had so bravely served her on that occasion by riding at a desperate gallop to her relief (her palfrey having taken fright, and dashed off at full speed with her against her will),—when he overtook her, endeavoured in vain to check her crazy steed, and finally lifted her in safety from her saddle to the ground, and probably saved her life ;—when Francesca thanked the stranger with her whole heart for this gallantry, she little dreamed that she should meet with him again so soon, and, least of all, under the present circumstances.

Rodolpho was then in search of old Donati, and he had traced him to the vicinity of the place where he chanced to meet with Francesca, who was enjoying her customary morning ride, when the above accident occurred. She invited the gentleman to return to her guardian's mansion, only three miles distant, the dwelling of Count Donati. This put Count Claudio at once upon the right scent ; but he was not then well prepared to meet his former associate. He left Francesca in charge of one of her neighbours, who was passing at the time, and then galloped away in an opposite direction. Very soon afterwards, however, the dusty traveller called upon the Count on other business. Francesca did not then recognise him ; but now she saw it all.



As we have already stated, the hour of midnight had struck, and Count Donati still reposed in his chair in his library. The young moon threw a pale light over the garden and foliage which surrounded the dwelling of the old Count; Claudio had escaped from his sleeping-apartment, and, attended by one of his faithful followers, was now quietly and softly wending his way to the upper wing of the villa, fronting along the outward walk that led to the vinery, guitar in hand, for the purpose of offering his signoreta a tribute in song, at which he was as accomplished as in most other ordinary affairs.

A midnight serenade was so common a matter in the vicinity of Count Donati's habitation, that had he overheard it, he would only have cursed the singer or singers that some other night had not been chosen for their compliments to Francesca, rather than have supposed it singular. But he still slept, and heard nothing.

Francesca had not retired. She had again perused that letter, and her romantic heart bade her respond to it without hesitation; but her maidenly pride and feelings of female delicacy forbade her to be too hasty. She thought of Count Donati; she turned over in her mind all the chances, good and bad, that seemed to present themselves; she reflected upon her present position and her future hopes; she believed that she was deeply in love—that she was as deeply beloved; and she strove to argue herself into the belief that such a meeting might not be indecorous or improper, under all the circumstances.

While she thus pondered, the midnight hour struck ; and she was on the point of throwing her veil upon her shoulders to repair to her own private bower beyond the terrace, when her motions were arrested by the sound of a guitar beneath her lattice-window, the chords of which were evidently swept by a master-hand.

Naomi retired instantly to a divan in the recess of the window, where her form was hidden in shadow beneath the heavy drapery, and where, unobserved, she could listen to the serenade. In tender, passionate strains of vocal sweetness, soft and gentle, but manly and noble in sentiment, the singer told his story to his fair inamorata. He recounted the dangers of his life, his happy adventure, his fortunate meeting with Italy's fairest daughter ; and, whilst the strings of his guitar were exquisitely handled, discoursed a choice and heart-touching accompaniment to his plaintive, beautiful song, as he concluded :

“Maiden fair, oh, prithee listen,  
Listen to my tale of love,  
While the silver moonbeams glisten  
Through the orange-scented grove.  
Let us wander, lady bright,  
By the moon's pale silver light,  
'Neath the shadow of the grove,—  
Lady, listen to my love !”

“'Tst—hist,” said a voice near the singer at this moment, and, turning quickly round, Rodolpho observed his faithful Pierre advancing stealthily, and

motioning him to retire within the shadow of the wall.

"There is some one stirring—the old fellow himself, I think," said Pierre, in a low voice. "I watched a light moving at the farther end of the building a few minutes since, and I noticed that it was carried in the direction of your sleeping-room. The old Count will miss you, Captain."

"How can he? the door is fastened."

"Exactly; but I thought to caution you."

"Thanks for your promptness. I will be careful. You may retire, Pierre; but be near me. Where is Antoine, and the rest?"

"In the lime-grove."

"How many are we?"

"Twelve in all, Captain."

"It is well."

Scarcely had this brief dialogue passed, when a slight rustling at the window on the piazza behind him arrested Rodolpho's attention, and a veiled figure stepped lightly out upon the walk. In a moment longer that figure disappeared beneath the shade of the vine-clad arbour, and in the next Rodolpho was kneeling at Francesca's feet.

"Lady," he said, as he seized her snowy hand, "a thousand thousand times I crave your pardon for this presumption; a thousand times, in one sentence, let me thank you for your condescension. You have taken from my heart a load of fear that even Rodolpho could not longer bear; and I owe you life and joy for the permission thus to kneel at your feet and swear eternal honour and fealty to you,

Francesca the beautiful,—the only woman to whom I ever bowed the knee.”

The rapturous manner of utterance which characterised this brief but earnest declaration, though it was subdued into a cautious tone, lest there might be some other listener to it, was highly flattering to the sensitive heart and romantic disposition of the beauty thus assailed ; but Naomi contrived to deport herself with becoming grace under the peculiar circumstances.

“ Signior,” she said, “ we are strangers.”

“ Say not this, sweet Naomi,” ardently responded Rodolpho ; “ say rather that Fortune has again thrown us together, that our cup of joy should be filled to the brim at once.”

“ Rise, Signior Rodolpho,” continued Naomi, “ and be calm. It scarcely befits an honourable lady’s reputation thus to meet at midnight, and hold converse with, one of whom she knows so little. But Francesca rejoices to say to him whom she now permits to kneel to her, that an unknown passion guides her. Until we met again, Rodolpho, the world was blank to me in comparison. You have stormed the citadel like a valiant soldier, and you may deserve to occupy the heart that until now has proved invulnerable.”

“ Thanks, sweet Naomi ; ten thousand thanks for words like these. But we must be strangers no longer, and you shall see how deserving I will be of your love. But not now, Naomi ; at some other fitting opportunity all shall be explained. Suffice it, I am not what I seemed to you. Suffice it, that fate presented

me the opportunity of being serviceable to you, and by that means subsequently brought me nearer to you. Suffice it, that I love you with an ardour that words are incapable of describing ; and let me promise you,—by all that I possess, by all that I hold sacred in life, by my fortune, my honour, my life,—that my intents and hopes and objects are for your happiness, now and hereafter.”

Thus passed nearly an hour. The honeyed words of the eloquent and passionate lover sunk deeply into the heart of the beautiful girl to whom he addressed them ; and when they parted, Naomi permitted her gallant to raise her hand to his lips. Rodolpho was in rapture. Naomi was happy in the consciousness of being thus beloved, and the interview ended with a mutual promise to meet again at an early opportunity.

The magician's professional business at Genoa was completed. He appeared there no more.

As stealthily as he left his sleeping-room, so did the traveller return to it. Pierre was at hand with the light scaling-ladder, on which Rodolpho mounted once more to his room, intending to retire quietly till morning, awaiting Count Donati's action in regard to the anticipated loan which he had promised, to be paid on the next day at noon.

“ Say to Antoine,” observed Rodolpho, as he was about to ascend to his chamber, “ that I shall not need his services, probably, with the men ; and he may retire to the wood at Concha, where I will meet him to-morrow night.”

“ Yes, Captain.”

"And let them get away slowly hence, to avoid observance, as they came. Before daylight they can all have retired, by twos or threes. Bid Antoine bring up the rear."

"I comprehend."

"Good night, Pierre."

"Adieu, Captain," said his companion, as Rodolpho sprang through the broad window lightly, and reached his sleeping-apartment again.

"Curse those love-sick swains, say I!" muttered Count Donati an hour previously, as he awoke from his nap and looked about him; for the conclusion of Rodolpho's song was just audible to him, in its tone and burden. "Confound those fellows! they are eternally singing to Francesca about her eyes and her mouth and her beautiful locks. Had I that fellow now by the ears, I would compel him to sing another tune, or I am not Bernardo."

This was but a momentary passion, however; for Count Donati was well aware that such serenades were by no means extraordinary in the vicinity of his premises, though he very little suspected who was the performer on this occasion.

Arousing himself from the stupor into which he was so wont to relapse, whatever he might have to do, or of however great consequence was his subsequent business, he arose at last and approached a closet beyond him, from which he drew forth a poniard; and then placing a huge pistol in his breast, he moved softly out into the corridor.

His mind was made up. He had resolved not to

pay Rodolpho another ducat, and he deemed it safer for his own future weal that his former lieutenant, who he believed was the only one in the clan who knew of his present whereabouts, should not be suffered to leave his house again alive to relate any suspicious stories. Moreover he believed, even if he should pay his present demand, that Rodolpho would find occasion to come again. He had been out of that sort of practice for two years ; but the time had been when the shedding of innocent blood did not annoy his conscience, and he was now fully equal to the task of placing what he deemed his enemy out of his way.

But it was necessary for Count Donati to move with caution in this undertaking. In the first place, he knew the character of Count Claudio, and he therefore knew that his life would not be sold without a struggle. In a hand-to-hand contest, Count Donati very well knew who would be likely to conquer. So he must destroy him as he slept, or fail in his purpose. Such, then, was his intent as he emerged in the darkness from his own private apartment.

Securing an old leathern purse, he dropped into it a respectable amount of gold ; and moving up silently to the bedrooms of his slaves, he entered one of them, and slipped the bag of gold beneath the pillow of Copo, who was snoring away quite lustily, little suspecting the perpetration of any evil in the vicinity. Returning as he came, he halted at the door of Rodolpho's chamber. The light was extinguished, and all was silent. So far well for his plan. He gently tried the door, but it was fastened on the inside.

This was unlucky ; but Count Donati had caused this room to be built and arranged to suit his own convenience, and he knew how to enter it by another way.

All this manœuvring occupied time, however ; and lest he should cause alarm, the hardened ingrate was obliged to proceed slowly and cautiously.

Half an hour had elapsed, and at length all was still again. The serenade had ceased ; the blockhead lover, or crack-brained swain, whoever he was, had gone ; the moon shone timidly into the chamber, and suddenly a secret panel in the hall slid noiselessly by, and the figure of an athletic man passed quickly into the apartment, as it slid as quickly back to its place. It was Count Donati who entered the bedroom of Rodolpho.

For an instant the old robber halted in his tracks, as if his heart misgave him, or his courage failed him at the last moment. But it was too late to retrace his steps. Rodolpho had become importunate. He would rob him by piecemeal. He knew his secrets ; he must die.

With the crafty step of the panther, he advanced to the bedside and threw back the curtains. His upraised stiletto glistened an instant in the moon's pale rays, and then descended with a murderous stroke. *But Rodolpho was not there !*

---



## CHAPTER XXII

## THE ATTACK AND THE RETREAT.

COUNT DONATI was more horror-struck when he satisfied himself actually that Rodolpho was not in the bed, than he could possibly have been had the poniard entered the heart of his guest. He was quickly and thoroughly alarmed at the hollow sound which echoed through the room as he sprang back and saw that he had struck so furious a blow at vacancy

The thick drops of perspiration that now stood out upon his forehead showed how terribly excited he was, and how difficult it was for him to return again to his former practice of crime. But he partially recovered his equilibrium in a few moments, and the first thought that suggested itself to him was : "Where is Bernardo?"

He turned the subject over hastily in his mind, and then asked himself, Has he fled? what can have been his object in this *ruse*? was he alarmed? will he return? if he does, what is to become of me? But, while he asked himself these questions, he suddenly overheard the low sound of voices beneath the window, and a moment afterwards he distinguished the figure of Rodolpho, as he was about to ascend the ladder to return to his own room.

All unconscious of evil design, and utterly unprepared for an assault or defence, from the circumstances of the case, at this moment, Rodolpho ascended

the ladder as nimbly as a cat, and gained the sill of the broad bay-window of his room. The ladder, which had been made for the purpose, was instantly withdrawn from below, and the faithful Pierre only waited an instant to hear "All's well" from his master's voice, to decamp with his orders for his band's retreat. Instead of this, however, his alarm and consternation may well be conceived, when his ears were suddenly saluted with a sharp cry from Rodolpho, followed quickly by the exclamation: "I am stabbed—Pierre!—quick!"

A shrill and peculiar whistle instantly followed this sentence, and in another moment the ladder fell against the wall, and Pierre was at the top of it, and through the open window.

He found his master prostrate upon the chamber-floor. Rodolpho clutched his assailant stoutly by the throat, while, with his other hand, he grasped the wrist of his antagonist, whose murderous hand still held the gleaming poniard, which, for aught he knew, had dealt him a fatal blow.

To dash the dirk from the enemy's clutch with his foot, while with his stoutly-clenched hand he sent Count Donati reeling across the apartment, was the work of but an instant; for Pierre was a bold and brave fellow, and he did not fear to assume responsibility when the occasion seemed to call for it. Rodolpho sprang to his feet, and his band by this time surrounded the house.

"Antoine!" shouted Pierre from the window.

"Yes, yes," was the response.

"Quick, for your life! this way!"

Antoine mounted the ladder, followed by three or four of the foremost of the clan, and meantime Rodolpho had secured the Count for the present.

But the inmates of the house had now been thoroughly aroused, and the confusion was momentarily increasing.

The remainder of the robbers had dispersed themselves around the outside of the mansion, and the cries of Count Donati had brought all his servants and slaves to the rescue.

"What, ho!" shouted the former companion of Rodolpho, when the robbers entered. "Within, there! Help! Pinta! Copo! Slaves, minions, help! help!" and the sturdy dependents of the Count soon thundered at the chamber-door, though they were desperately alarmed.

While Count Claudio hesitated a moment as to what course he should take in the frightful and altogether unanticipated emergency, the chamber-door was dashed from its hinges, and half a dozen stout, brawny-limbed slaves rushed in to their master's defence. The mind of Rodolpho was made up on the instant.

"Down with the knaves! Down with them, comrades!" shouted Rodolpho, securing his pistol and stiletto; "they have chosen this way of settling our affairs, and we are agreed. Down with the rascals! Secure the plate and valuables; don't harm the women; sack the house; see to the gold and jewels; and burn the buildings over the ingrate traitor's head! Away!"

The well-armed robbers had already walked out

over the falling and fallen forms of the comparatively defenceless slaves of Donati, and, followed by Rodolpho, they very soon found their way to the plate-room. The men outside had finally broken through the tower-windows, and effected an entrance, though they had been at first opposed by the inmates, who were soon overpowered and driven back. The plate was taken care of; the strong box had been demolished and rifled, and the gang ascended to secure the jewels and other valuables that might be found.

The wound upon Count Claudio's shoulder was a severe one, and it continued to bleed profusely; but, with the nerve of an enraged lion, he still pressed forward with his men, to be avenged upon the scoundrel who had so deceived and injured him. His followers dashed through the elegant apartments in hot haste, lingering only here and there a moment to grasp some valuable ornament or other, and at last reached the wing appropriated to the females of the house and their attendants.

Terribly alarmed, the women had rushed at last in a body to the beautiful boudoir of Francesca, where they sought counsel temporarily amidst the uproar of the attack. In vain did Donati attempt to rally his slaves to the defence of his property and their own lives. In vain he cursed their cowardice, and yelled at them as they fled. Half a dozen lay prostrate, just where they stood, in the onslaught, and several of the others had received such severe cuts and blows from the robbers *en passant*, that all were agreed that the better part of valour

was discretion; and they governed themselves accordingly.

Count Donati was not the man to yield thus readily, however; and, single-handed, determined, valiant as ever he was, the ancient robber rushed upon a detachment of the assailants, whom he saw in the act of bearing away his massive silver plate. It was a bold attack, but an unfortunate one for Count Donati; for the robbers fell upon him violently, and quickly left him covered with wounds and contusions, dying, where he fell! But another scene was enacting at a remote quarter of the dwelling.

While the women huddled around the form of their young mistress, and besought her to tell them how they should escape violation and murder at the hands of the ruffian robbers; and while Francesca herself, deeply alarmed, and pale as a water-lily, stood wondering what course she could pursue for their and her own safety,—even in that trying moment her thoughts turned to her strange lover; and she would have called upon Rodolpho to save her, but she could not summon fortitude so to act.

Then came the thought, on a sudden, Where is he? has he escaped? can he have fallen in the *mêlée*? and where was Count Donati, her protector? But there were none to answer; and the riotous noise continued within and without the building, and now the robbers approached even the boudoir of Naomi! What could be done?

On came the band, excited in the highest degree, still seeking for new plunder of value. On they came, with oaths, and shouts, and menaces; and in

another moment one of the side-doors of the boudoir was forced, and half a dozen robbers rushed through the aperture. The women screamed from fright, and madly rushed to the feet of Francesca, clinging wildly to her skirts, and imploring her to save them. But aid was at hand !

At the opposite door the stranger-guest suddenly made his appearance, and, rushing to the centre of the apartment, "Back, villains !" he said, as he brandished his huge poniard ; "back, I say !" and then a pistol-shot followed, and then another, as the women fainted, and the robbers gave way before the fury of Rodolpho.

But no one was injured in this assault. The scene was very opportune ; for Naomi now saw, in the valiant defender of herself and attendants, her lover and former deliverer, once more. But there was no time to be lost. The robbery of the premises had been complete, Count Donati lay gasping for breath in the great hall, and the torch of the incendiary had already begun to do its frightful work upon both the stables and the dwelling.

As the intruders were driven back from the apartment of Naomi, the women dispersed ; and, when they had recovered from their fright, each one took the shortest way to get out of the house, and escape as best he could. One lady alone remained.

"Loved Francesca !" said Rodolpho kindly, "do not speak to me of valour now ; do not halt to thank me for this good fortune, which has placed me at your side at such a moment. Count Donati has

fallen, pierced with a score of wounds ; the villa is now on fire. Quick, then, if you value your life !”

“ Whither, oh, whither can I fly ?”

“ This way—quick, dear Naomi ! Trust to this good right arm, and to the honour of him who loves you.”

“ Fire, fire ! the house is on fire !” yelled a cowardly skulk, who had just shown himself ; and, with these words, he scrambled down the stairs, and disappeared.

Naomi placed her hand in that of her lover, and Count Claudio lost no time in conveying her quickly to a place of safety. Nothing more was seen of Count Donati. The crackling flames soon burst forth with frightful fury from a dozen different points, and the splendid mansion, with its costly furniture and appointments, was very shortly afterwards a heap of ruins. As the flames crumbled and fell in, a groan or two was heard ; but the falling walls and timbers crushed to atoms all which remained within that had ever breathed the breath of life.

When a few of the neighbours arrived, at last, they found only the smoking remnants of the famous dwelling of Count Donati. The robbers had made good their retreat, and, save the crackling of the unconsumed remains of the mansion and the gabbling of the slaves, who each in turn told the awful story in a different way, there was nothing seen or heard till sunrise next morning.

In the mean time, Rodolpho, with his precious prize, the lovely Francesca, had reached the skirts of

the wood which bordered on the highway, half a mile from the site of Count Donati's villa.

Rodolpho, who had previously made his own arrangements accordingly, but without any suspicion on the part of Francesca, called upon his attendant Pierre for horses.

"Haste thee, Pierre," he said, in a pleasant tone to his subordinate, "and bring me swift steeds, that shall bear us away from this terrible scene, from the peril of which we have now only partially escaped."

The attendant disappeared, and soon after returned with a pair of splendid beasts. Count Claudio continued to sympathise with and comfort Francesca in the midst of her excitement and alarm ; and, reassuring her of his protection and love, they quickly mounted, and rode off at a gallop side by side.

---

## CHAPTER XXIII.

### THE WRECKERS AND THEIR PLOT.

A FEW leagues to the eastward of the mouth of the river Guadiana, the Point del Pincho stretches out into the sea. Within this reef, to the northward, between the point and the inconsiderable town of St. Hucho, there are numerous small, rocky islands, inhabited, but very sparsely, by a race of men who were born there, and who subsisted by plunder, or upon the fish they obtained in the little coves and bays around them. They



are an ignorant, selfish set of knaves, for the most part ; and whenever an opportunity presents for them to rob a distressed vessel that may chance to come within their reach, they do their work as thoroughly as could possibly be devised.

Moreover, they have a very taking way with them. From their earliest days they are rocked in the great cradle of the deep, and they know very little of danger on the seas. When the storm raves the loudest, and the waves lash the shores with the greatest violence, the hardiest of those fellows are the merriest ; for they deem these forbidding symptoms a sort of forerunner of good luck for them, by means of which, peradventure, some unfortunate lugger or galiot, well laden with fruits and wine, or more costly merchandise, bound to or from the Straits of Gibraltar, may seek a harbour near their region.

Long experience in that heartless profession had taught them many a trick of deception, which from time to time, as occasion called, they turned to their advantage. Not the least of their contrivances was the habit, in bad weather, of showing false lights at one or two prominent points on the islands, by which means many an unfortunate bark had been lured to the spot, and to subsequent destruction.

It was ten days after the burning of Count Donati's dwelling ; and the previous four-and-twenty hours had been distinguished for one of those severe gales which so often raged in the vicinity described. The scoundrels who existed by preying upon their fellow-beings amidst their misfortunes, were in

ecstasies with the prospect before them ; for the wind came in a steady strain from the south-west, and its fury, even in that wretched locality, had scarcely ever been equalled.

“ A cracking breeze, this,” said one of the chiefs to a neighbour at evening, as the two were, accompanied by some dozen or more of their confederates, huddled around a blazing fire that had just been kindled in a deep niche of the rock, out of sight.

“ Yes,” was the reply ; “ and if this gale does not waft some grain to the old bin, we may well doubt the ancient saw, that it’s an ill wind that blows nobody good.”

“ Well said, Boseat ; well said ! Who has the glass ?”

“ Old Pedro, yonder.”

“ Ah, I see. Pedro, what’s abroad to night ?”

“ Not a chip,” replied that worthy, who, under the shelter of an old piece of sail, lay, like a huge turtle beneath a fern, upon his belly, spy-glass in hand, scanning the horizon from south-east to north-west ; but not a spec could be discerned.

The darkness increased ; and, as the evening wore on, the wind blew fiercer, the surf dashed higher over the rocks, and the ill-disposed wreckers laughed louder, or sang their rude songs more roisterously.

“ Merrily ho ! the wide winds roar !  
The Storm King’s abroad  
In his rumbling car.  
Ho, ho, ho !  
Ha, ha, ha !

What care we, when the waves run high  
While the night is dark  
'Neath the blackened sky ?  
Mid storm and dim,  
Oh, then we win.  
Ho, ho, ho !  
Ha, ha, ha !"

"Quiet, Fernando."

"A sail !" said Pedro quickly.

And "A sail ! a sail !" ran along through the group, as Fernando obediently halted with his noisy song, and Boseat, advancing, took the glass from the hands of the look-out at the top of the rock.

"What do you make her out, Bosy ?"

"A galiot, I think. No, a brig."

"A brig ! a brig !" shouted the wreckers.

"Now for sport, and a recompense for the long watch we have endured," continued Fernando.

"Away, boys," continued Boseat somewhat authoritatively ; "away to the peak, and light the beacon ; muster, quick !"

In a few minutes a bright light was burning upon the highest point of the rock ; and while two or three of the men remained to feed the flame and keep it steady, the rest scattered themselves along the cliffs and ledges, to await the result of their scheme. The little brig was doomed ; for the light had been discerned on board, and the helm had been put hard-up to make the haven.

\* \* \* \* \*

When Count Claudio escaped with Francesca Donati, in the midst of the confusion and apparent peril of the scene of the burning, the sweet girl

saw only her deliverer in the man who urged her to fly from the danger that threatened them. When the prancing steeds were brought, all caparisoned, at the word, a thought of the strangeness of the event crossed her mind for an instant, and she did not exactly comprehend the matter.

With the readiness and tact which always served him in these little emergencies, however, Rodolpho observed her momentary uncasiness, and he quickly anticipated her inquiries.

“Loved one,” he said, “let me urge you to hasten. My own favourite steed, as you see, has been saved from destruction through the exertions of my servant ; and his horse also is here, at your service. You will recognise your own saddle and appointments, which Pierre contrived to rescue as well ; and now, if you will, we may mount and fly from the pursuit which threatens us.”

This appeal was sufficient. Naomi saw that the buildings must be destroyed. Count Donati had been left senseless in the ruins. Peril, if not death, was evidently behind her ; and she decided to accept her lover’s offer. So, springing into the saddle, she joined Rodolpho at once, and dashed on through the wood towards the next village.

Daylight broke as they entered this small town, bearing the terrible intelligence of the attack of the banditti and the sacking of Count Donati’s dwelling. After a hasty repast, Rodolpho proposed to Naomi to keep on. He deemed it unsafe to tarry in so small a place, and hinted that he had friends beyond to whose care he could consign his lovely charge ; while

in person he proposed to return to the villa, and learn the details of the attack, and the fate of her guardian. The proposal was accepted, and an hour subsequently Naomi found herself comfortably domiciliated at the dwelling of one Señora Maidenness, described by Rodolpho as a relative of his, to whose favour for the time being he commended Francesca; while he returned, as he said, once more to the scene of his last night's adventures.

At nightfall Rodolpho returned to Naomi with the information that she feared to hear. According to the last accounts he could obtain of the melancholy facts, the mansion had been totally destroyed; no vestige of any thing of value could be found; and it was believed that the remains of the unfortunate Count Donati were buried in the ruins,—no trace of him having been seen after he fell in the hall of the house. The wound of Count Claudio did not prove so serious as was at first feared it might be; and when he had given Naomi all the information he had gathered, he appealed to her to know what course she would pursue under the painful circumstances in which she had become so suddenly involved.

Poor Naomi! She had no choice. She knew not whither to turn her steps. Her guardian, Count Donati, had been snatched away from her without a moment's warning; his property had been stolen or destroyed; and her relations were either dead, or were now become comparative strangers to her, and at best were in a far distant land. She had no words to answer the query of her lover, whither she would go. With ready tact Rodolpho

observed her embarrassment, and availed himself at once of the circumstance.

With all the eloquence and earnestness of the fervent lover, he pleaded his own cause before the idol of his heart, and he besought Naomi to rely upon him in her frightful dilemma. He did not fail to picture to her the perils she must necessarily be surrounded with ; and at the same time he offered to become her friend, her guardian, her protector, constantly from that hour. He told her of his burning love for her ; he swore eternal devotion to her, and solemnly offered his hand with the heart that adored her.

The fair young being at whose feet he knelt had no disposition to argue the point, but she felt that they were still strangers. Their acquaintance was, in fact, but very recent, and she could not bring herself to accede to his wishes on the instant. Nevertheless, she responded kindly and gratefully to his friendly words, and assured him that he deserved all he pleaded for. At least she would confide in him for the time being.

Count Claudio was content with this concession ; and he set himself to work forthwith to complete his present scheme and consummate his final aim,—to wit, his early union in marriage with the fair creature whose charms had so entranced and bewildered him from the first moment he met her.

At the expiration of three days thereafter, Francesca consented to quit Italy in company of Count Claudio, who had constantly been in attendance upon her, and who had been continuously

argent in his importunities that she should leave the scene of her present troubles, if only for a season, and visit Sicily with him, which he claimed as his birthplace and his home. The novelty of the proposed tour so pleased her, that at length she consented to join him ; and Rodolpho absented himself for four and twenty hours, to complete the arrangements for their journey.

At the mouth of the river there lay a small brigantine at this time, a pretty and well-appointed craft, evidently in readiness to put to sea at a very brief notice. The wind was blowing fresh from the northward ; and towards evening a stranger, in the garb of an ordinary peasant, emerged from the forest at some distance above the spot where the vessel lay quietly at anchor.

He was plainly in search of the brigantine, and, approaching the spot where she lay, he drew from his breast a small blue flag, or strip of bunting, which he waved over his head once or twice without speaking,—a signal which he seemed to understand was made on board the vessel at once,—and soon afterwards a boat reached the shore. From the stern-sheets a stout young man sprang upon a little knoll near by, and in a hasty manner the stranger communicated to the sailor his plans.

“I comprehend,” said the former.

“Be ready, then,” said the stranger. “We shall be here at evening to-morrow.”

They separated ; the boat returned to the brig ; and Count Claudio—for he it was—retired to the forest once more, mounted his horse, and rode back

at full speed to the temporary halting-place, where he had left Francesca awaiting him.

In a little time the requisite arrangements for the journey were completed, and on the following night Rodolpho handed the beautiful Francesca up the gangway of the *Falcon*.

---

## CHAPTER XXIV.

### THE VOYAGE AND THE WRECK.

THE little brig had been at sea two days, and thus far had made good headway towards her destination, with a fresh wind from the northward and westward. But on the morning of the third day the sun rose in a hazy atmosphere, and very soon afterwards the scudding clouds foretold that heavy weather was at hand.

The *Falcon* had run down to the south-westward, and was upon her course to round the headland of Point del Pincho, it being the aim of the commander of the vessel to clear that dangerous vicinity, if possible, before night, as he well knew the perils of the waters near the islands and reefs, which show themselves in a clear day, in that locality.

As the day waned, however, and evening set in, the heavens were darkened by thick black clouds, and the whistling of the rushing wind among the rigging and against the light sails on board the *Falcon* was evidence sufficient to the sailors that they would have a sharp time in getting round the



headland, at best. But, as the storm increased, due caution was exercised ; and at the same time, the wreckers on the shore beyond were more and more delighted, for they believed that such a gale must bring its booty landward.

The night proved one of those wretchedly gloomy ones, when not a star could be seen ; and as it lengthened, that darkness deepened. The surge dashed high over the rocks in every direction, and the look-out on board the *Falcon* had been cautioned to be especially wary. On a sudden, a light was discovered, and the cry of " Land, ho ! a light !" was quickly reported by the watch.

" Where away ?" asked a bold voice on the instant.

" To the north-east, over the lee-bows."

It was Count Claudio who made the query, for he had been upon the deck for the twelve hours preceding, and this announcement caused him anxiety.

The light was now clearly seen by all hands, and the question arose, " What is it?"

It had been impossible during the day to take the customary observation at noon, in consequence of the thick weather ; and both skipper and crew were entirely at a loss to determine where they were. Rodolpho, however, entertained his own suspicions secretly, but he did not utter them.

An attempt was made forthwith to wear ship, and claw off the coast ; but this was found to be utterly impracticable, from the violence of the gale, which was now rapidly increasing, so that sail could not be carried ; and besides this, the *Falcon* was a heavy sailer, and could not be readily managed

The effort to lay-to was quite as futile, and it was clear that she must make a harbour, or go ashore. In this dilemma Count Claudio called the master aside, and in a low tone asked him if he could divine or imagine where they were, and what light it was they saw so distinctly ?

"I know," said the skipper, with some feeling, "that we are to the nor'ard of the point, and that the light we see yonder isn't what I'd like to see."

"Then you suspect—"

"I don't suspicionise nothing," continued the old sailor bluntly.

"Well, it is a false light, then ?"

"It must be."

"And we must go ashore, too ?"

"I can see no other hope for us."

"Captain, we have too precious a burden on board your craft to sacrifice it thus without a struggle," continued Count Claudio, with emphasis.

"What do you propose, then ?"

"I will give you a hundred doubloons, in addition to your price for conveying us to our destination, if you weather this gale in safety."

"And you think that the lives of myself and crew are to be put into a money scale, do you ?"

"No, no, Captain."

"You so propose ; for, do you think I won't do all that a man can do under such circumstances as these ?"

"It is well."

"Breakers !" shouted the look-out.

"Breakers ahead !" continued two or three

voices at the same time ; for the crew had now become thoroughly alarmed, and as thoroughly watchful.

“ What’s to be done now must be done quickly,” added the Captain, turning to the Count ; “ we’re within half a mile of that infernal reef, and *they are waiting for us.*”

“ I see it all,” said Count Claudio ; “ you have fire-arms on board, have you not ?”

“ Yes.”

“ Place them in the hands of every man on board, then ; and if we must fight, we will not be taken at any disadvantage that it is in our power to control. What’s *that* ?”

The vessel had struck ; but she passed over the hidden boulder, and the Captain sprang at once to the helm.

“ Lively, men !” he cried ; “ for your lives ! Clear the sheet-anchor ! Let go !” And in less time, apparently, than we have occupied in relating the fact, the anchor went down, and the brigantine swung round to the wind.

This was but momentary, however ; for the hurricane was dreadful, and the poor crew found it extremely difficult to stand upon deck at all. The heavy roaring waves dashed over the little vessel, and her bulwarks were quickly stove, as one of the boats went by the board.

The Captain of the *Falcon* was a brave sailor, however, and he had faced many a gale as stiff as this in his time undaunted. But the anchor dragged, and the best bower was at last resorted to as a final hope.

The brig had sprung a leak ; but for a few moments she lay firm to her anchorage, and it was believed that she might yet weather it.

There were anxious hearts on board that little craft, and a prayer went up from the lips of beauty to Him who rules the storm, that they might escape from the terrors of that dark and awful night.

“She’ll soon be here,” remarked Boseat to his companions, as they skulked about in the rock-clefts. “She’ll soon be here ; but, somehow or another, she’s been pretty well managed, that’s certain. I shouldn’t be surprised, Pedro, if there’s some one on board that craft that has been caught in this latitude afore. An’ I reckon he doesn’t like the company he thinks he’ll have to meet here.”

“Very like, very like,” was the response.

“How’s’ever, they must come to it. Whew ! how it blows, to be sure !”

“That’s it—that’s it !” said Boseat again ; “she has parted her cable. The fore-chain is light. Now she swings to it again—hugh ! But there’s a comber for you ! Now she comes ! now she comes ! Stand ready, boys !”

As Boseat spoke, an enormous wave rolled down before the wind, and striking the brig fairly, her cable broke. Four or five men were washed overboard, and the deck was swept clear of every thing movable.

An indistinct order was given in relation to lowering away the boats ; but in the midst of the howling storm and the roar of the surge which

dashed upon the sturdy rocks, this order was useless—for none could hear it ; and, moreover, since their fate seemed to be inevitable, a sullen stupor and reckless resignation seemed to have seized upon both officers and crew. The *Falcon* drifted rapidly shoreward, and a few minutes afterwards she reached the ledge, from which she never again departed.

When the brig struck again, the violence of the shock seemed for the moment to awaken the wretched crew anew to the peril of their situation. Death stared them palpably in the face, and it was worth one more effort to save their own lives.

“To the boats !” shouted Rodolpho ; but there was but one boat left them. Still he shouted, “To the boat, men ! A thousand ducats if we reach the shore. Get out the boat !”

A light form, and a cheek pale and cold with fear and watching, now presented itself at the companion-way, supported by the strong arm of Rodolpho himself, and by clinging, as she ascended, to the sides of the passage.

“Cheer thee, cheer heart, dear Francesca,” said Rodolpho affectionately.

“Is not ~~this~~ peril awful ?” she asked.

“It is indeed ; but do not despair. Come, cling to me ; and if we must meet death in this way, you shall die in the embrace of him who will cheerfully risk his life to aid and save you. Cheer up, loved one !”

Thump, thump, thump ! The death-knell of the *Falcon* had pealed. She was dashed into splinters upon that reef within the next half-hour. The

boat had been got over the side, and into it some six or seven human beings sprang, seemingly all at the same instant ; for in the next it was far away from the sinking vessel on the top of a huge wave, with but a single oar to guide or control it, and swiftly drifting shoreward amid the whitened and foaming surge.

In the stern of the boat sat Count Claudio, clasping in his arms the almost lifeless form of his sweet Francesca, who, all unaccustomed to such rough usage and frightful scenes, had fainted in her lover's arms, from fear and exhaustion.

"Steady, boys," said the Count encouragingly ; "keep her head up. Now she rides ! Steady—so. A thousand ducats, as I said, if we reach the shore in safe—"

Crash, crash, crash !

The deed was done ; the storm had triumphed.

The boat was stove, and her bow dashed far away in the whirling current, while the stern was whirled in splinters to the shore. The remainder of the crew, Rodolpho, Francesca—all were now struggling for life, with scarcely a shade of hope, amid the merciless raging waters.

"The gig is up, boys," said Boseat gruffly. "She's gone to pieces. So far as the craft is concerned, we shall not make much out of her. By Jove ! but isn't this a whistler of a breeze !" he added, as he placed his rough hand to his head to keep his sou'wester in its place. "Howsoever, we shall have a shy at the cargo, if she had any. Halloa ! what's yonder ?"

There was an object of interest in sight—the form of a man, struggling with the waves, but a short distance from the shore. He was plainly much exhausted. There were two persons there—three ! The light had gone down considerably, but still its glimmer could be distinguished on the rock.

And still the sufferers struggled on amid those heaving, angry waves, surrounded by darkness, peril, despair.

---

## CHAPTER XXV

### NAPLES—A TRIO OF NEW FACES.

SOME six weeks subsequently to the events narrated in our last chapter, there came to Naples, in the *vet-tura* from Vecchia, a little party of nobility, comprising three persons of apparent rank ; to wit, a lady and two gentlemen, and their retinue of some seven or eight attendants. They halted at the most fashionable hotel temporarily, and submitted to the highest charges for their accommodation without a query.

The foremost of this trio was a splendid-appearing, but rather a youngish man, known by the title of Count Autienne. His male companion was one Don Felix Barbierre, from Madrid. The lady was thought to be the most graceful and lovely of all the female strangers that had been seen in Naples for many seasons. The party travelled *incog.*; and as this was a very common occurrence, none seemed to know or care who the new-comers were. They

lived in the best style ; paid their bills promptly through their secretary and steward ; and every body seemed to be content with them, without asking troublesome questions.

It appeared, at the end of a week, that the Count Autienne was the happy husband of the beautiful Señora, and that the little party were from the North on a visit to Naples to pass their honeymoon. They had been wedded but a few days. The Don Barbierre was rather a confidant than otherwise,—the constant companion of the Count in his rambles, and seemingly a friend whom both the Count and his lovely wife valued highly. He had served the noble Count right valiantly in several emergencies prior to this time, and he was deserving of their united friendship and favour.

As we have already stated, there were in attendance upon this party some half-score of servants and *attachés*, and a highly respectable establishment was maintained by the Count at his hotel. But few acquaintances were made, however, by the strangers, as the newly-wedded couple appeared to be quite as well pleased in the society of each other as in any other way ; and affairs passed along as joyfully and as smoothly as heart could possibly desire for five or six weeks after their landing at Naples.

About this time there arrived an invalid with a single servant, who halted at the same hotel where the Count and his party were domiciled. He was a tall, gaunt-looking man, wan and pale from disease, and crippled by gout apparently, or some rheumatic affection. He moved about but little, and always



leaned upon his attendant when he went abroad. He visited Italy to recruit his broken health, and had but just recently got up from a bed of fearful illness.

The features of this man were forbidding, and his deportment generally was not by any means agreeable. However, it was the season for the annual visits of the floating foreign population which crowds the Italian cities every year, and no one cared for the old man's gout or his scowls, since each one had his own pleasures and pastimes to attend to with all the leisure he could command.

"Sancho," said the old man gruffly, very soon after reaching the hotel—"Sancho."

"I am here, Señor," was the reply.

"Hast thou seen aught here since our coming that thou hast seen before?"

"Good master, if I might rightly judge of the query propounded, I would say ay; but I may not comprehend it."

"Look again, then, and report to me anon."

The attendant retired, and a sort of fiendish smile trembled one moment upon the wan countenance of the invalid stranger.

In the course of another hour the servant returned, and quickly communicated with the old man. What he said could be a matter of conjecture only; for he whispered information he had gathered in the old fellow's ear, who seemed vastly delighted with the discoveries Sancho thought he had made.

"You did not expose yourself, Sancho?"

"No, Señor; no. But they would not remem—"

“Keep within doors, Sancho, and leave the rest to me.”

It was late in the evening of the following day. The night was unusually fine even for that lovely climate; and the Count Autienne, as was his daily habit, had wandered away into the great gardens of the hotel, accompanied by his beautiful young wife, to enjoy the soft air and healthful influences of the open atmosphere.

The wind was gentle as the breathings of an infant; the odours from the groves were inviting and grateful to the senses; the myriad stars that dotted the firmament twinkled joyfully above the lovers, and nature seemed to be at rest, as the soft zephyrs breathed gently among the vine-covered arbours.

“Life of my life,” said the handsome Count, in a gentle tone, to his loved wife, “are we not now supremely happy? Within the enchanting shadow of this gorgeous grove, beneath such a sky as this, surrounded by all that heart can wish in a temporal view, why should we not be happy in each other’s love?”

“We should, indeed, be very happy,” responded the fair creature who sat beside him.

“And yet you sigh for home?”

“Ah, Count, how many perils have I passed through within a little time, and how singularly distressing was my departure from that home!”

“But you do not repent, surely?”

“No, no; not that, my ever best of friends. Yet you will return anon, will you not?”

“Whenever it may please my love to choose it,”

"My poor guardian!" sighed the lady, in reply.

"You never knew him, love; else you would not sigh for him, I warrant me."

"Knew him? How? Surely he was the kindest of friends to his poor orphan ward?"

"Still, I repeat it, you never knew him."

At this moment the Count sprang quickly to his feet, and seized the handle of his rapier.

"Did you hear nothing?" he asked, turning to his wife.

"Nothing, save the wind among the shrubbery. Did you?"

"I think we have had a listener here. Let us return;" and, with this suggestion, the Count placed his wife's arm within his own, and emerging into the main avenue, they bent their steps towards the hotel once more.

They were now at a long distance from the piazza of the house; for the garden was a spacious one, into which the guests of the hotel frequently wandered after nightfall. They proceeded on, however, unmolested, and the Count began to believe that his usually acute hearing had this time deceived him, when the tall, gaunt figure of a man suddenly stepped out from beneath a clump of trees, and confronted them. It was the crippled stranger, who had recently arrived at the hotel, accompanied by a single servant.

"Signior," he said, "I greet you."

"Signior," replied the Count quickly, but not a little embarrassed at this unanticipated meeting, "I give you good-night."

The Count would have passed on after this rather formal response, but the stranger said :

“ May I have a word with you, Signior ? ”

“ Me ? Surely—yes—that is—come to my quarters within the hotel, and you may have a hundred words or sentences, an’ you like, so that they be civil.”

“ I would speak with you here, an’ it please you ? ”

“ No. Do you not observe I have a lady with me ? ”

“ The lady may retire.”

“ No, I repeat,” continued the Count, annoyed. “ If you have business with me, come to my hotel. I have no leisure or inclination, i’ faith, to talk *here*; and so again, I give you good night, Signior.”

But the intruder stood in the path ; and the lady had become thoroughly alarmed at his importunity. He approached the Count more nearly, and gazing in his face, he said :

“ Your Countship does not seem to recognise me, I observe ? ”

“ This is not the place to recognise—”

“ It is well, then. At what hour may I meet you at your lodgings ? ”

“ Whenever it best suits your leisure.”

“ At eleven, then, to-night.”

“ At eleven be it. I will expect you.”

“ You may do so, Count. *Adios*,” continued the traveller, retiring ; and the nobleman hastened forward with his young wife to the hotel.

“ Who can it be ? ” she asked, as soon as they were fairly rid of the intruder.

"I have no idea," said the Count ; "nor have I care about it, either. Be he friend or foe, I shall now prepare myself to receive him."

"Did you not suspect him?"

"No ; he was undoubtedly masked ; and, moreover, the darkness was such that I could scarcely swear whether he was black or white."

"And you will meet him?"

"Assuredly will I!"

"He may have evil designs upon you?"

"Never fear, love. I think you are over-cautious ; but I will venture nothing. It is now near ten ; at eleven o'clock he will unquestionably be here. You may retire ; and trust me, I will risk nothing."

The Count escorted his lady to her chamber, and then he sat down to reflect upon what he should do under the circumstances.

After a few moments of thought, he rang for his friend Don Felix, who attended upon him directly, and to whom he at once intrusted the details of his adventure and his appointment.

"And have you no idea who he is?" asked his companion, after listening to the story.

"Not the slightest. He is unlike in form and features, so far as I could judge, any one I can remember to have met."

"Do you think he really knows you ? or may he not have mistaken you for some other person?"

"It may be thus ; but he was exceedingly importunate and peremptory in his manner."

"That may be a part of his plan, to bring about some particular object."

"Well, time flies. He will be here anon. Within the recess yonder ensconce yourself, good Barbierre. I have no fears in this matter ; but I prefer that you, my friend and confidant, should know the nature of this man's business."

"Well-timed caution, Count. I will retire here. Are you armed?"

"Thoroughly."

"Good night, then," said Don Felix, as he concealed himself from view ; and in a few minutes the servant announced a stranger in waiting to see the Count.

"Show him in," said that gentleman to the attendant ; and immediately the old man hobbled into the room.

## CHAPTER XXVI.

### TWO SIDES OF AN IMPORTANT QUESTION.

WHEN the decrepit intruder crossed the threshold of the apartment, the Count Autienne was sitting very leisurely at a large circular table, enjoying his cigarette, and seemingly content with himself and every one else in the world.

"I have the honour of meeting with the Count Autienne," he said, drawing up a chair, and sitting down so as to confront the former.

"Such is my address here," replied the Count.

"You appear at ease, good Count ; and you sleep well at night, I dare say?"

"What may be your business with me, Signior?"

asked the Count immediately, and in a rather tart tone. "If you have aught to communicate worth the hearing, I am here to listen to you ; if not, leave me to my leisure, for the hour is late."

"What I have to say, Count, may or may not be worth the hearing ; of that you shall be the judge."

"Will you proceed?"

"I will, good Count ; and first I will say, that you are lately arrived in Naples."

"Well, and what of that?"

"Nothing, Count. You came hither direct from the north of Italy."

"Did I?"

"I say you came hither direct from the north of Italy."

"Perhaps not."

"Well, I so understand the fact ; and I am curious to obtain some information from you, if you will humour me."

"Go on, then," replied the Count, with a patronising air.

"I am an old man, as you see, Count, and you will pardon me. But a strange story has just reached me, touching the fate of an old and valued friend of mine, who dwelt near Genoa ; and you may have heard the details of the accident, which I will relate to you as it comes to me. He had resided in the vicinity of Genoa some time, and was beloved by all who made his acquaintance. Few knew whence he came when he first arrived there ; but he had made a handsome fortune abroad previously, and, after a long life of toil and peril, he retired to enjoy his means.

He was liberal, and proved a good neighbour, and time passed happily in his quiet household. I grieve to learn that a terrible mishap has lately befallen him ; and, as you came recently from that quarter, as I hear, you may have learned particulars in regard to his fate. His name was Count Donati."

"I have heard that name."

"As I was saying, then, in the midst of his enjoyment of what he had toiled for, a murderous band of mountain-robbers attacked his dwelling but a few months since, and, having robbed his house of every thing it contained of value, they fired the buildings, and escaped with the booty. Count Donati defended his property, of course, to the best of his ability ; but he was overpowered with numbers, and he fell at last, covered with wounds. This band of robbers was led on by one Rodolpho, a villain and an ingrate. This scoundrel had contrived to cheat the Count out of a large sum of gold but a short time previously. But he was not content with this. It was insufficient that he should murder Bernardo, and leave his lifeless body to be consumed amid the ruins he had caused ; but beneath those walls, contented, happy, hopeful in Bernardo's love, dwelt a beautiful flower, just budding into womanhood,—a graceful, joyous, virtuous maiden,—upon whom this desperado set a mark. In the midst of the dire ruin and confusion of that dreadful night, the villain stole that maiden—and escaped. So runs the tale. Tell me, good Count, have you not heard of this ?"

"Yes," responded the Count, "I have heard of this ; but do you know no further details ?"



"No, no. I hear that you are now from Genoa, and recently ; and I feel certain that you would tell me if this sad account were true."

"And you are now inclined to know the rest?"

"Yes, Sir Count ; I pray you let me know all the details."

"There is another phase to this sad drama, Signior ; and, since I have so attentively and silently listened to your story, do me the favour to hear the rest, as it came to me."

"I am all attention, Count."

"This same Donati, although he may have been your friend, was a consummate knave, an ingrate, a liar, and a robber once himself. Such is the character that I have heard of this Bernardo ; and when I left Genoa a few weeks ago, I heard the details which I will now repeat to you. You have spoken of one Rodolpho. This veryman had aided Bernardo into the position he held, and through his exertions, at a period prior to Count Donati's residence at Genoa, he had helped him largely to the means he now possessed. This same Rodolpho, some two years afterwards, found himself in comparative adversity, and called upon Bernardo to redeem a voluntary promise he had formerly made him whom he was pleased to call his friend in prosperous days. Count Donati received him with apparent welcome, and agreed to accommodate him in his pecuniary emergency. Rodolpho became his temporary guest, and Bernardo, *alias* Donati, repented of his offer. Forgetting all that he owed his former friend, unmindful of the obligation which he had voluntarily

assumed, reckless of the consequences which might attend his villany, and, more than all, regarding his ill-gotten money of more value than his honour,—he stole to the sleeping-room of his former friend, and there basely attempted to assassinate him. But, luckily, Rodolpho was not there alone. He had known Bernardo for some time, and he knew him for a treacherous villain ; he was prepared for violence, and was ready. Enraged at the treachery to which he had so nearly fallen a victim, Rodolpho called for the aid which was so near at hand, and then and there avenged himself upon the spot. Your information is quite correct, good Signior. Rodolpho did sack and pillage Count Donati's house, and then he caused his premises to be fired. The flames of his villa soon after hissed over him, and the traitor was buried beneath the walls of his own house ; a fitting punishment for the ingrate's perfidy."

"Count Donati, then, is dead?" said the stranger, with evident feeling. "Ah, my unlucky friend ! But, good Count, there was an item in the account, as current rumour gives it, that you have not alluded to,—Donati's ward, Signora Francesca, what became of her? Some say that Rodolpho was not satisfied with leaving the Count Donati's body to be consumed by the flames of his own homestead, but that he actually, and by force, bore the fair girl away, and then, by violent threats, compelled her to marry him."

"Some such account I do remember having heard," said the Count confusedly. "But a truce to further banter, Signior. I have already lent you

too much of my leisure without knowing whom I have the honour of speaking with. Your name, then, Signior, ere we proceed further?"

"Let me remove my mask, Sir Count, and you will then see if we have ever met before;" and suiting the action to the word, the visitor quickly displaced his closely-fitting mask, and the Count as quickly sprang to his feet, astounded.

"Bernardo!" exclaimed the Count wildly.

"Count Donati, at your service," continued the intruder, as calmly as he could speak under the circumstances. "And now, Rodolpho, Count Claudio, your incognito will serve you no further in Naples. You may be the Count Autienne no longer here. You stand at this moment face to face, Rodolpho, with the man you have robbed and nearly murdered; him whom you left to the mercy of the flames which devoured his property; your former master, whom you know too well to believe that he will not be even with you yet."

"Donati," said Rodolpho, deeply agitated.

"Hear me," thundered Bernardo. "Listen to what I have yet to add. You have forfeited all claim to mercy or consideration. You have placed yourself in a position of rogue among rogues. You have committed acts which language is inadequate to denominate. You have robbed and imposed on me,—me, who you know full well will have revenge, redress, for this foul injury."

"Come, Bernardo," said Rodolpho coolly, "suppose we consider this matter like men of experience, at least in concerns of this character, and like men

who are acquainted each with the other's faults and virtues?"

"I am not here to bandy words."

"I judge not; but unless you lower your tone of voice, all Naples will soon know that Bernardo and Rodolpho, two of the most notorious brigands in Europe, are at the present moment in their very midst. The chance for either of us to retire from this place when this should be made public would be a very indifferent one, I fancy."

"Give me back my ward; restore me my gold. Show me at once that you will render me satisfaction for the ruin you have so nearly accomplished, or I will be summarily avenged."

"Not too fast, Bernardo. Francesca is now my wife."

"Wife! Do not talk this to me," said Bernardo, with a sneer. "Think you that I am not better acquainted with you than to believe for one moment you are married to her?"

"I tell you that she is my lawfully-wedded wife."

"I tell you, Rodolpho, she is my ward, and you shall—"

"Hold, Bernardo. You are proceeding too far. I will submit no longer to your insults and your abuse. You know me; go, then, denounce me. Tell the authorities of Naples that I am Rodolpho, if you dare do it; and then you may add, that I defy both them and you. Pierre, come forth!"

In response to this order, Bernardo was astonished and alarmed to see a stalwart figure spring forth from the recess behind Rodolpho.

"Bernardo," continued Rodolpho, "you would have murdered me in cold blood, even whilst I was your guest. You put at defiance me and my necessities, and you must take the consequences. I give you nothing, accede to nothing. Let us be strangers, enemies if you will, but not one jot or tittle of my rights do I yield or concede to you."

Scarcely had Rodolpho concluded, when Bernardo sprang at his throat with a tiger's fierceness, and dashed him against the wall of the apartment. But the act was very quickly responded to by Rodolpho, who was backed by his faithful and powerful companion, Pierre.

"Quick !" shouted Rodolpho to his attendant ; "there is but a single chance left us. To the right, Pierre;" and with these brief words Rodolpho seized upon the person of old Bernardo, and was quickly backed by his companion.

A heavy fall quickly followed the remark of Rodolpho as the form of Bernardo disappeared within the recess.

"Trait—" screamed the old man. But ere he could finish the word, a handkerchief had been forced into his mouth ; he was thrown violently upon the floor by his two assailants ; his hands and feet were instantly tied ; and thus, gagged and pinioned, they left him in the closet in silence and darkness.

It was now midnight. As Rodolpho returned to his room again, with Pierre at his side, he said :

"What remains to be done must not be delayed."

"But how are we to move?"

"Easily,—easily enough. Since he is not dead,

I have no wish to be his murderer. I will not harm him personally, except to protect myself and my interests. I thought he had fallen beneath the smoking ruins of his house. He has escaped; let him live. Now to business. You see, I did not anticipate this adventure; but to guard against accident, I laid my plans so as to be able to depart from here at a moment's notice. Order our horses, therefore, at once."

"Where shall we rendezvous?"

"At the gorge in the rear of Vecchia."

"When, Captain?"

"To-morrow night."

"Good."

"I will be with you at the rising of the moon. In the mean time, make no unnecessary stir, but retire quietly and speedily as may be. I will address a note to the landlord, to be delivered to him to-morrow morning, requesting him to release the old man yonder. *Adios!*"

The robbers parted company; and Pierre set about his departure instantly. Every thing was quickly in readiness; for Rodolpho, or "Count Autienne," as he was known in Naples, had so arranged matters that he could retire at any time without causing suspicion. As soon, then, as Pierre had left his presence, he retired to a small ante-room, where he secured his own private jewels and gold; and then seating himself at a small table, he leisurely wrote a note to the landlord of the hotel, in the following words:

"SIGNIOR,—In the closet of the principal apart-

ment I have lately occupied, beyond the sleeping room, you will find a scoundrel, gagged and pinioned, who ferreted his way into my presence at midnight, and would have murdered me, but that I put him at defiance and conquered him. I have spared his life, which, under the circumstances, he knew was a leniency on my part ; and I desire that you will lose no time in releasing him from his present uncomfortable position as soon as you may receive this note. He is a heartless, treacherous scoundrel, I repeat ; but I do not fear him. When you shall receive this, I shall be far out of his reach. *Adios!*—AUTIENNE."

This brief missive he carefully sealed, and ringing the bell, he handed to an attendant who quickly entered the letter and five ducats, saying :

"Take charge of this for your master, and be sure that you deliver it to him the first thing in the morning. You understand?"

"Yes, Signior."

"My servants and retinue?"

"Have already departed, Signior, half an hour since."

"It is well. Now order my travelling-carriage."

"The carriage is in readiness, Signior, by order of your secretary, who with the rest have gone forward."

"You may retire," said the Count ; and five minutes afterwards he repaired to the chamber of his wife, to rouse her for the journey so suddenly determined upon.

The utter consternation of Rodolpho may be

conceived when, upon entering, he found the couch was undisturbed, and Francesca missing.

---

## CHAPTER XXVII.

## MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE OF FRANCESCA.

WHILE Rodolpho was making his final arrangements for the departure to which we alluded in our last chapter, and at the moment he discovered that his loved Francesca had so mysteriously disappeared, a troop of well-mounted horsemen, headed by Pierre in person, were galloping along at a rapid gait towards the rendezvous assigned them by their commander. Ere daylight broke they were safely sequestered in the gorge beyond Vecchia, where they were to remain for further orders. These men had lately formed the retinue of attendants and *attachés* to the Count Autienne at Naples. They were, in fact, a portion of the band of Rodolpho, of which Pierre was now lieutenant.

In the meanwhile, as we have seen, Rodolpho had written his note to the landlord, and it had passed out of his hands. Upon reaching his wife's apartment, he was astounded to find that she was absent; for he recollected quickly that, as he left her at the door a few hours previously, he had cautioned her particularly against any intrusion. We must now go back for a moment in our story.

"Retire," he said, "loved Francesca; and having locked the door upon the inside, remove your key.



I have a duplicate, and I will thus return to you anon, without disturbing you."

She followed his instructions; but neither of them suspected that they had been dogged, and that their very movements had been watched during the evening up to their arrival at the threshold of their sleeping apartment. Such, however, was the fact.

Scarcely had the footsteps of Rodolpho ceased to echo in the long winding corridor which led from one of his rooms to the chief parlour he occupied, when the figure of a stalwart man darkened the passage-way beyond the chamber-door. Advancing cautiously, the person alluded to halted near the room where Francesca had retired, and having seemingly taken a careful survey of the door, he disappeared; but in a few minutes he returned again, applied to the lock a skeleton-key, and, without uttering a single word of explanation or warning, thrust himself at once into the astonished presence of Francesca. The intruder was the man who had crossed the path of Rodolpho in the garden a few minutes previously,—it was her former protector and guardian, the Count Donati, who stood, unsummoned, before her!

"Heaven preserve us!" said Francesca, deeply startled, and scarcely willing to credit her own vision. "Count Donati, is it yourself? Speak!"

"I see, Francesca," responded Donati at once, "that you have not forgotten your old protector and friend."

"Tell me, Count Donati, I pray you, what does this mean? Whence came you? How did you

escape the perils of that awful night? What has brough—”

“Cease, Francesca,” replied Donati, in a hurried manner; “cease to question me at present. I have no time for answers, not a moment for explanation. I come to rescue you from the toils of a villain,—a traitor, a consummate scoundrel,—who has seduced your affections, and who will prove your certain ruin, body and soul, unless you flee at once from the meshes in which you have become entangled.”

“I beg you, good Signior, explain those dreadful words. If I have erred—”

“*Erred!*” exclaimed Count Donati, with deep emphasis. “Poor child! how have you been deceived and cajoled and perilled? But redress and aid are at hand. The wretch who has imposed upon us must now answer for his villany. Count Donati lives to protect his ward.”

“O Signior, of what terrible conspiracy am I the victim, as your words may indicate?”

“Francesca, in one word, are you not the companion of Rodolpho, the bravo?”

“I am the wife of Rodol—”

“Pshaw, girl! Do not attempt to deceive me with this stale stuff.”

“I tell you, Signior, in all honesty, I am his lawful, wedded wife; our hands were joined by a priest of the Holy Church within this month.”

“Then are you thus doubly deceived; for he has imposed a false priest upon you, I do not doubt. But haste thee, Francesca, for I am here to claim my ward; and I demand your attendance on me

forthwith. For the present, you will leave this place under my protection, and I will quickly show you how fortunate you are that I have been able thus to rescue you from the power and the companionship of the vile robber and knave who has so cruelly imposed upon your gentle confidence. Quick, then ; for time presses me !”

“ *Robber, Signior !*”

“ The chief of a murderous band of robbers, Francesca. The leader of the clan that sacked our dwelling, and left me amid the burning ruins. The wily magician of Genoa who stole my gold and cheated me of my ward amid the ruin his hand had been the cause of producing. I speak the truth, Francesca ; and I am here, I say, fully prepared to punish *him* and to save *you*. Haste, then, I repeat ! Anon you shall know all.”

Even while he spoke thus earnestly, Count Donati approached his late ward, and taking her hand, he urged her immediate departure.

Francesca was lost amid her consternation and the conflicting emotion caused by this astounding announcement ; for she now heard, for the first time, that Rodolpho was such a character. His own account of himself had been indefinite, but satisfactory to her for the time being ; and she had had no occasion thus far to suspect him. Least of all did she imagine that her fortune had united her in wedlock with the chief of a band of robbers ! But she did not pause to dwell on this, for Count Donati continued to urge her onward.

“ Come, Francesca, confide in the man who has

proved himself your friend ; come, and rely upon the honour, the confidence, and the love of one who never deceived you ; come quickly ! Every thing shall be duly explained. But do not defer this opportunity to escape from the peril which threatens you."

Bewildered, grieved, astonished, yet confiding in the statements of the person she had known for years, Francesca suffered herself to be led from her chamber, through the corridor, to the great entrance-hall below, in silence ; for her heart seemed ready to burst with the crushing information which had been imparted to her. A carriage stood in waiting at the portal ; and as she was about to emerge from the private door of the hotel, her reason seemed to return to her, and, with a look of unutterable anguish and love combined, she turned to Count Donati, and uttered the name of "Claudio."

"Do not speak that word here, Francesca, or we are lost," said her companion. "Remember, he is not known here save as the Count Autienne. He may be disposed to repay the evil he has done, and he may yet escape also. But, ha ! I go to confer with him."

"Claudio ! my husband ! O Signior, spare me the pain of such a separation, such a flight as this ! I beseech you, allow me to speak with him one word, one single sentence, at parting, and I go under your guidance willingly."

"No, Francesca," responded Count Donati ; "no ; such a course would be fatal. We have no

time for this. Be advised by your old guardian. Come! You will be borne to the house of a near friend of mine, close at hand, and I will communicate with you again within two hours."

With these last words, Francesca was urged forward, and placed within the vehicle; the door was closed; and the wife of Claudio, all unconscious of her destination or her fate, was hurried away from her hotel to a place prepared for her, and previously agreed upon between Count Donati and the driver, who had been heavily bribed for this service.

All this had occupied but a few minutes of time; and Count Donati immediately afterwards made his appearance, disguised as we have seen, in the apartment of the Count Autienne. The interview of the two robbers succeeded this transaction. Count Donati was secured, and lay pinioned. In the recess the letter had been written by Rodolpho, the remainder of the band had departed, and Rodolpho went to seek his wife; but, as we have stated, she was nowhere to be found.

Rodolpho could scarcely credit or realise the fact; but his wit did not desert him. He fancied a hundred ways to account for her absence, though he at once sought for her in every direction. She might have returned to the garden alone, he thought, — though such was not her custom: he threaded every avenue there without success. He returned to her room: she was not there. He inquired of the night-servants: but no one knew a word about the matter. In vain he essayed to trace her out,

Could she have eloped? No, no. He was cruel thus to suspect her for a moment. ~~She must~~ have joined Pierre and his party, probably through a misunderstanding on his lieutenant's part. He wandered through the house, utterly forgetful of every thing save the mysterious disappearance of his beloved wife. At last, as morn was approaching, he met by chance one of the attendants who had seen Francesca as she stepped into the carriage, and who supposed that she had left in company with the others, as all of them moved away at about the same time.

He so informed the Count ; and it was but a very few minutes before Rodolpho, greatly relieved in his mind, was galloping at full speed towards the rendezvous.

Morning broke at last ; and at a reasonably early hour, the attendant who had been intrusted with Rodolpho's letter delivered it, as instructed, into his master's hands. It was a strange missive, and a very impudent one—so thought the landlord ; but he lost no time in proceeding to the spot designated, where he found Count Donati, helpless and greatly exhausted, and whom he caused to be released at once from his jeopardy and durance.

The old Italian was not seriously injured, and his plans had thus far worked so well that his spirits very soon revived, and he told his own story to the landlord, who at once agreed to keep quiet for a good and valuable consideration. The chief object of Count Donati—to wit, the separation of Francesca from Claudio, and the obtaining possession

of his ward again—had been accomplished, and he was well satisfied with his success thus far. But his enemy and his clan had escaped, certainly ; and this he regretted. However, he would follow them up ; there was yet ample time to enable him to be avenged upon the man whom *he had taught* to be a villain, and who had for a time obtained the advantage over him, wicked and cunning and reckless as he had himself been.

Claudio reached the gorge beyond Vecchia, and quickly communicated with Pierre and his men ; but no word of information could he obtain amongst them of his lost Francesca. Well-nigh frantic with disappointment, he for the first time suddenly suspected that Count Donati might have been instrumental in spiriting her away. How this could have been effected, or by what infernal machinations the Italian might have obtained access to his wife, he could not divine. Yet he *suspected* his antagonist ; and this was enough.

After a brief consultation with the lieutenant, he quickly decided upon the course he should pursue in his present emergency, and he went about the prosecution of his intentions forthwith.

---

## CHAPTER XXVIII.

### THE BEGGAR OF THE HOTEL ST. MARC.

FOR several days prior to the scenes we have just now related, there had been seen daily among the *lazzaroni* that loitered near the terrace of the hotel

where Rodolpho had tarried a professional beggar, who had attracted his especial notice from his peculiarity of costume, and the particular air of presumption which characterised his continual alms-seeking.

Rodolpho had not escaped this inveterate beggar's appeals; and more than once when he halted to contribute his mite to the fellow's demands, did he scan his countenance, and aim to read his character in his face. The beggar suspected nothing, however; and Rodolpho moved away, with the conviction that something perhaps might be made of this forbidding mendicant at some time or other.

"Do you not remember, Pierre," he asked, turning to his lieutenant suddenly, "the person of the miserable beggar we have so often met at the foot of the terrace, near our late lodgings—him with the slouched hat and scarred eye?"

"Very distinctly, Captain."

"I am glad of that."

"He was a cunning rogue, I think."

"You are right. I would use him."

"That may be easily done, Captain. His size and figure are not unlike your own."

"So I believe. Come, join me at once. I will return to Naples."

"To Naples, Captain?"

"Yes; I must have the suit of clothes that fellow wears. You shall know particulars as we proceed along."

"I see, Captain."



"Perhaps you don't, though. But hasten ; we have no leisure for explanations now."

The two men were very shortly in the saddle, and but a short time passed ere they arrived as near to the vicinity of the hotel as they dared approach. Here they alighted and held a short conference, the result of which will be made to appear as we proceed. They separated finally, and before noon the plan proposed by Rodolpho had been successfully commenced.

Towards evening the residents at the hotel sauntered forth to enjoy the cool breezes which were wafted from the waters, and the *lazzaroni* were abroad, as usual, with open palms and piteous stories. Among them appeared the noted beggar we have alluded to, who lounged, as was his wont, at the foot of the outer terrace.

There came along an oldish man, well-dressed and firm in his gait; but one who had evidently been ill of late, who gave alms but charily, and who did not like the annoyance occasioned by the frequent applications of the street-loungers.

"Give, Signior ; give to the poor cripple, an' it please you ; the smallest pittance will be grateful," said the one-eyed beggar imploringly.

It was Count Donati whom he thus accosted, and who felt generous at this moment ; for he had secured the person of his charming ward, and Rodolpho his enemy had fled from Naples. He was at that moment on his way to Francesca, who had been secreted at the mansion of an acquaintance since her abduction ; and he felt that he had the field to

himself. Tossing the largest silver coin he had in his pocket to the beggar, he said:

"You are a lazy, one-eyed rascal ; but I am in luck to-day. Take it, and do not annoy me further;" and Count Donati passed rapidly on towards the dwelling where Francesca was temporarily domiciled.

"One-eyed," muttered the beggar to himself; "yet, with that same one eye, some there are who could see more than many others with two;" and as the Count hastened along, the rough beggar disappeared at once from the foot of the terrace.

Count Donati moved with hurried footsteps ; but at a distance there followed on his track two forms, that he little fancied were so near him. He turned, and passed to the left down a long avenue, and then crossed again to the right. As the evening shut in, he halted before a modest-appearing dwelling, mounted the steps, opened the door without ceremony, and entered the house.

The blinds were closed, and though one of those that followed him approached the window stealthily, he could see nothing, and for a time the evening silence was unbroken. At last voices could be heard, and loud words were spoken ; and now the conversation became more animated, and the beggar beneath the window, the same to whom Count Donati had given the piece of silver, caught every syllable of the exciting conference.

"I tell you, Francesca," continued the old man, in a severe tone, "that you cannot act for yourself in this fearful matter, and you must be advised ; the

laws of Naples will protect me in my guardianship, and you must submit to my authority. However you may will it, I will never consent that you shall see this villain again."

"Signior, he is my husband!"

"Pshaw! Out upon the vile wretch who has so deceived you. Fly from him, forget him, and be saved while you may; or, if you will be obdurate, I shall interpose my authority, and compel you to return with me. Nay, do not appeal to my better nature, Francesca; my purpose is fixed. We leave Naples to-morrow. I counsel you, then, accept with becoming grace what you have not the power to prevent."

Much more than this was heard by the beggar beneath the window, who still crouched and listened attentively till the interview was over. He heard the lady appeal to the old man in piteous tones to spare her, to allow her but one moment's interview with her husband; but he was obdurate, unflinching, decisive in his determination.

Even as he skulked beneath that lattice, and while his ears were drinking in the sobs and prayers which were uttered by the persecuted and suffering Francesca, he felt a hand laid suddenly upon his shoulder; and grasping a glittering stiletto as he turned round, he heard a whisper which he instantly recognised.

"Hist! how is it?"

"As I supposed. She is here."

"Good."

"And he is *here* too."

"He need not go far away from this place," suggested the other person, "if you but will it." And at the same moment the latter drew from beneath his ragged cloak a shining dagger, which he clutched firmly and spitefully.

"No, no ; not now. That will defeat all. He proposes to bear her away perforce to-morrow."

"Time enough then."

"Yes ; but we will be cautious. Mark you this dwelling."

"That is easily done."

"Do not err, for your life. And now to horse *instantly*. We will return anon."

The beggars were soon out of sight, and, as has already been suspected by the reader, there can be little question of their identity. It was Claudio who had listened to the threats of Count Donati and the pleadings of Francesca for the last half-hour ; and his companion in disguise was the hard-fisted, redoubtable Pierre, his lieutenant. They had contrived to purchase the dresses and the absence of the real beggars, who were known by their attire, near the hotel ; and assuming their habits and manners, they had succeeded in deceiving Count Donati completely, and at the same time discovering the habitation of the lost but still faithful wife.

The two robbers rode hard to head-quarters ; and upon arriving at the retreat of the band, Claudio sprang from his jaded mare, and summoned his clan about him instantly.

"Men," he said, "I have an enterprise for you, in which I feel far more than the ordinary interest

which attaches to our expeditions, and for which, if successful in it, you shall be sumptuously rewarded for the peril to be incurred."

"What is it, Captain?—What is it?—Where shall we follow you?" exclaimed his comrades, waiting for the proposition and eager to be busy.

"Bernardo — now styled Count Donati — has played me false again. He lives. comrades; he has dared to cross my path, and has offered our heads for sale to the Neapolitan authorities."

"Where is he? Where can we find him?"

"Order. Be quiet, and observe my instructions. He is in Naples; he has stolen my brightest jewel from me, and I must recover it and be avenged. Not a moment is to be lost. Pierre has his instructions from me in detail. Follow his orders, and I will meet you at the scene of action. The mission is one of hazard, and every man must do his whole duty, for his own weal and the success of my plan."

"We are ready, Captain," was the immediate response of every member of the band.

In a few minutes every thing was in readiness for the advance. Claudio went forward at once, and Pierre, with about a dozen stout-hearted, stalwart fellows, quickly followed in his commander's footsteps.

At about an hour before midnight the marauders entered the city in pairs; and the final rendezvous having been agreed upon, and the signals arranged, Pierre proceeded to reconnoitre before the attack was undertaken.

The plot was well laid by Claudio, who had

resolved upon making a dash at the dwelling where Francesca was confined ; and in the midst of the confusion that must ensue, he determined to carry her off at the hazard of his life. It was a bold step, but no other resource was left him. There was no time for dallying or diplomacy.

A *coup d'état* was his only alternative, and he grasped the details of his scheme with the readiness of an accomplished operator.

---

## CHAPTER XXIX.

### THE ATTACK AND THE RESCUE.

PROMPTLY to the moment previously agreed upon, and at a little after midnight, the band, in different disguises, and fully armed, made for the appointed rendezvous.

Two individuals that were foremost in arriving at the immediate vicinity of the residence of Count Donati's friend stood under the dark shadow of a high garden-wall, and conversed together in a low and earnest tone of voice. They were Claudio and his lieutenant.

"Pierre," said the former, "it is a hazardous and forbidding undertaking. The servants and household of Montesque is large, and the odds would be against us under ordinary circumstances here ; for I would not harm the person of this man, who evidently means only to befriend our antagonist and enemy ; neither am I disposed to attack his attendants. He has never injured me."

“But the Lady Francesca?”

“Ay, Pierre, you are right. She is a prisoner there. You may smile at my earnestness; but I tell you, in all candour, that within the walls of that mansion there is now imprisoned all that I hold dear in life. My business is well-nigh finished, Pierre, in the profession.”

“Captain,” exclaimed Pierre with surprise, “what mean you?”

“Well, well, we will talk of this at another time; yet I am disposed to quit the life I have led so long, and I shall name my *successor*, you know, by our rules.”

“I have no ambition, Captain, to serve under any other leader but yourself.”

“Thanks, Pierre. We have stood by each other’s side in many a hard skirmish, and I know your worth surely. We will speak of this at another time. But our present business is a movement of importance to me; and it must be adroitly conducted, or blood will be spilled. I would avoid this, Pierre.”

“Your orders will be obeyed, Captain.”

“I know it, and this is the reason I am now so particular.”

“I will only repeat what I have already directed you to do; but I reiterate it, because I only desire to get possession of Francesca. So, then, unless we fight for our lives, we will not discharge a pistol, remember. Our men here are all athletic fellows, and they must be discreet and quick in their movements, and all will go well, I think.”

“Will you lead us, Captain?”

"No ; you lead the attack. We will force our entrance with the least possible disturbance. I myself will seek Francesca, and point out her best mode of escape. See that the men are properly stationed to guard our exit ; and once more, above all, avoid confusion and noise, unless we are compelled to use force."

"I understand, Captain. But how will you find the lady's room. Were you ever in the house?"

"No. Are you ready?"

"The men are within hailing distance. But what have you here, Captain?" continued Pierre, as Claudio drew something from beneath his cloak.

"This is part of my armour, Pierre," replied Rodolpho good-humouredly. "You have seen it before ; and you shall now observe how effective a weapon this guitar will prove."

"Really, Captain," rejoined Pierre, "you are happy in the selection of so mild a weapon. The plan is capital, to be sure."

"Retire, then, Pierre, and watch for the result. I will strike the strings beneath the lower wing of the dwelling where I suppose she may rest. If any response shall follow, be ready at the word with the men."

"You may count on us, Captain," replied Pierre ; and the two men parted company.

A few minutes afterwards the chords of the guitar which Claudio had brought with him were swept in artistic style, and a clear, manly voice accompanied a melody familiar to the ears of the prisoner within.



The young wife had retired to her couch for the night. She had wept and sighed, and yearned to speak a few parting words to him she loved so devotedly, and from whom she had been so suddenly separated. Her heart was torn by the cruel act of Count Dornati, which she could scarcely believe was not a frightful dream, rather than a reality; and her brain was wrought up to a point of frenzy when she pictured to herself the thousand perils to which her beloved husband might be subjected. Heart-sick and utterly broken down with her grief, she had thrown herself upon her couch, and an interval of wakeful sleep had overcome her temporarily. The night was far advanced; and as Francesca turned upon her uneasy pillow, she recognised, or thought she recognised, even amid her dream, a well-known and favourite air that she had heard him sing before. It was only a dream, though, and the lovely but persecuted wife slept on; for it was sweet even to dream of the happy hours and scenes which she had known so recently.

The serenade continued; the harp-string leaped with melodious sweetness; the voice was the same she had listened to in brighter hours than this; and the words were familiar indeed:

“ My bark is on the waters, love,  
The breeze is fresh and fair;  
Then hie, then, 'neath the starlight, love,  
My happiness to share!  
And we'll away, we'll away,  
For we may not brook delay;  
Our boat is at the shore—  
Let's away, let's away!”

Francesca was awake.

She did not slumber ; she did not dream : she was sure of this, and she sprang to the lattice with a heart full of hope. She gazed abroad ; she saw the form of the singer. She doubted no longer : it was Rodolpho her husband. He was safe, and had come to claim his bride.

The faithful woman forgot Count Donati ; she forgot all he had said of Rodolpho ; she thought of nothing on earth save to fly and be with him once more. No matter what he was ; no matter whither he would bear her ; no matter was it to her heart that his name was a terror to others ;—*she loved him !*

Her determination was quickly made. Seizing her veil, she advanced to the door of her chamber, resolved to escape without another word or thought. But, to her surprise, after removing her key, she found that the door of her apartment was secured on the outside. Returning to the window as quickly as possible, she leaned forward, and beheld her husband below, backed by half a score of men who had just responded to the preconcerted signal.

“Hist !” she said quickly ; “Rodolpho, I am not deceived?”

“No, loved one ; you are correct : I come to rescue you. Haste ; we have not a moment to lose.”

Matters were very soon explained, and Claudio soon learnt that his wife had not the means of egress from her sleeping apartment. Every apparently approachable portion of the dwelling was quickly examined ; but every point was thoroughly secured. There was but one plan left them.

"We must force an entrance," said Claudio, in a low tone, to Pierre ; "there is no other alternative. Let us retire to the south wing, dash out one of the windows, and follow me within. Is the horse saddled ?"

"Yes, Captain, and in charge of Antoine, close at hand."

"Good. Now, then, bring up the men."

In another moment a dozen stout, armed brigands were clustered beneath the shadow of the piazza, and a crash was heard as the casement and lattice gave way before them. The entrance was effected, and Claudio rushed in, followed by one half of his band. Mounting the broad stairs, he sprang along the corridor, crying aloud, "Francesca ! Francesca ! Francesca !" as he advanced.

The household was but slowly astir, for both the proprietor and his servants slept soundly. Yet the confusion had become too great to escape the observance of the sleepers ; and in a few seconds, as the shrieks of Francesca increased amid her excitement and fears, the servants and their master began to tumble out of their beds and their rooms to learn what was the trouble.

The attendants rushed along through the darkness ; Francesca continued to shriek her husband's name ; and Claudio was soon before the door of her apartments.

"Francesca !" he shouted, "I am here ;" and as the door gave way before the shoulders of his foremost men, the brigand dashed into the room, and received his wife in his arms.

Quickly he bore her from her place of confinement; and his faithful comrades, advancing before him, cut a passage over the falling forms of the terrified servants, who had crowded themselves for a moment upon the stairs and within the hall below.

Pierre advanced, his men closed up the rear. The retreat was as sudden as the entrance had been successful; and long before the astonished Montesque and his household had had time to gather up the stunned, Claudio, at the side of his lovely wife, was galloping out of Naples, followed by his valiant and faithful men.

Count Donati, who after his interview with Francesca had retired to his hotel, was quietly asleep. He had made sure of his victim this time, he thought, and he would leave Naples in the morning, accompanied by his ward. Such, at least, had been his intention.

---

## CHAPTER XXX.

### HUSBAND AND WIFE—THE EXPLANATION.

THE shadows of evening had fallen upon the earth three months after the events just narrated, and the attention of our readers is now invited to a happy scene many leagues distant from Naples. We have said it was a happy scene, and so it was. Francesca, the beloved of Claudio, the contented and loving companion of the whilom robber-chief, sat by the side of that same brigand, her lawful husband, in a superbly decorated apartment at the Hôtel l'Anglais, at Leghorn.

"Once more, Claudio," she said, as he clasped her soft white hand, and she looked up lovingly into his handsome face,—“once more we are comparatively at ease, and safe from annoyance.”

“Yes, dear Francesca,” responded Rodolpho affectionately ; “we may rest here after the tumultuous and harassing life we have led for the past five months, and feel at leisure. I promised you, at the fitting time, to tell you my history, you remember?”

“Ah, Claudio, you may well believe that I have not forgotten that ! Pray tell it me, my husband.”

“To begin, then, Francesca. Of my early days I know little. As far back as I can remember, I never knew the smiles of a parent, and I can now but indistinctly call to mind the friendship even of any particular individual. I was reared in a place now unknown to me—that is, up to the age, as I suppose, of some nine or ten years. About that time I recollect being placed early one cold morning in a *diligence* ; and after a hard ride of fourteen or fifteen hours, was set down at an indifferent-looking house in the city of Paris.

“There I continued to reside for three years afterwards. A small portion of the first two years I attended a school, and became fond of study for a while ; but on a sudden, without any more explanation than had been vouchsafed to me on my entrance, I was taken to a southern port—Marseilles—where I remained some four years longer, occupied as I had previously been, and supported by those whom I never knew or saw.

“The parties who had me nominally in their

charge were exceedingly lax in their management, and I soon became my own master. I followed my own inclinations ; went where fancy led me ; returned when I thought proper ; and very soon made them tired of looking after me in my wanderings. As I generally had a small amount of money which I could call my own, I frequently delayed my return home for days.

“In the mean time I was rapidly growing up, when one day I was informed that my *protecteur* had become bankrupt, and had declined to advance the means to défray the charge of my board and contingent expenses ; and that I must find other accommodations and the means to take care of myself forthwith.

“I was thus thrown upon the world without a franc, for I had expended all my money weeks before. I knew no way to turn to obtain a living, and I had not had a suitable education for ordinary business pursuits.

“But, during the time I had resided in Marseilles, I had met with a famous juggler, of astonishing deceptive powers, into whose good graces I had ingratiated myself, and who took a great fancy to me for my aptness in acquiring a knowledge of his tricks and manœuvrings. To him, then, I immediately appealed, and he willingly assisted me when I made known to him my unfortunate position.

“After a few months of constant practice, I had become so thoroughly proficient in the art of legerdemain, that I accompanied him on a continental tour as his confederate. We were eminently suc-

cessful for a time ; but my star of good fortune deserted me in an evil hour, and I made the acquaintance of a rascal who imposed upon and well-nigh ruined me."

"And who was this person?" asked Francesca with deep sympathy."

"You shall learn anon. As you are aware, Francesca, fortune favoured me, and I was known in Genoa as the Count Claudio, a young nobleman, wealthy, extravagant, but, beyond the follies of youth, with spotless character. None knew my previous history ; and as to who I was, or what my origin, I could not myself inform them ; so perforce it remained a mystery. You were a girl of some sixteen or seventeen when first I made your acquaintance. Fascinated by your beauty and gentleness, I fell deeply in love ; and, dear Francesca, to my inexpressible joy, I had reason to believe that my love was returned. But then there came storm-clouds, which obscured the bright sunshine of our love : that terrible woman appeared ; and driven to despair, I rashly attempted to carry you off, and thereby incurred your displeasure. I had become desperate, and seeking the gaming-table, was in one night utterly ruined. I met there a stranger, who was in the same plight. I said something about taking to a brigand's life ; he eagerly caught at the proposal ; and having agreed to meet again, we parted. I set out for the appointed rendezvous, and there became an outlaw, under command of the notorious Bernardo. I continued with him for more than a year, became his lieutenant, served him and his cause faith-

fully; and when he had amassed and secured a fortune as chief of the clan, he retired and named me his successor, with a voluntary promise of aid should I ever need it at his hands. Two years passed away. I was at times successful, at others unlucky. I contrived to save some portion of the ill-acquired gains of the band, but at last became in a measure needy; and then, as a last resource, I called upon the man whom I had helped to make rich for his promised aid in my emergency; but he scouted me, and refused to oblige me with the loan of the few thousands that I required. It was not *my* money, but it was not *his*; and I demanded what he declined to lend me. Francesca, I see by your excitement that you suspect the rest. Be calm; trust in me as you have trusted, and be sure that you will never have cause to regret your love or your confidence. As I hope for mercy, what I now speak is the truth. That ingrate coward, Bernardo, was your guardian, Count Donati!"

"Mon Dieu!" exclaimed the wife, scarcely knowing what she heard or what she said. "My God! how have I been thus deceived?"

"Speak, then, Francesca," continued Rodolpho wildly. "Speak; tell me in one word what is now to be my fate? How I have loved you, how my all of hope and joy is wrapped in your weal and happiness, I will not now repeat. But tell me, am I still loved, still honoured? Shall I retain your affection and your confidence, since now you know my secret and your *own*?"

She sprang upon his neck, and while he kissed



away the flood of tears that gushed from the fountain of her overcharged heart as she remembered all she had passed through for him in the past few months, she reassured him of her unalterable affection for ever.

“Claudio,” she said, “if it may afford you one moment of joy, or if it shall haply be the occasion of relieving you from a doubt of my devotedness, let me pledge anew to you the earnestness of that love, the whole of that heart, which you alone have ever occupied. I am your wife, Claudio, your trusting, loving wife. Believe me, I am yours, now and ever !”

Of a truth, it was a happy scene. Francesca had now learned from the lips of the only man she had ever loved his story from his childhood. She could easily conceive how such a man as she knew Count Donati to be could manage to entangle and lead astray an ardent, careless youth like her lover in his earlier years. But all had now been explained to her satisfaction, and she could look forward to the future with bright hopes.

Claudio had assured her that his professional business in the mountains was over. He had already separated himself from the band, and measures were at that moment in progress for the pardon of the brigands by the Italian government, who were about to issue a proclamation to that effect, after in vain endeavouring to subdue the robbers by force. He had resolved upon quitting that part of Italy, and purposed to travel with his fond and lovely wife. He had not saved much out of the gains of his “Cap-

taincy," but in his magical profession he was still an adept, and he did not fear for the future in a pecuniary view.

---

## CHAPTER XXXI.

DONATI, CLAUDIO, AND FRANCESCA.

WHEN Count Donati arrived at his friend's mansion in Naples, and learned the story of Francesca's escape and the attack of the robbers, he was at no loss to determine in his own mind by whom they were led. He was much exasperated at the result of the scheme, and his regrets were great at the loss of his ward again, the possession of whose person he thought he had made himself sure of.

He left Naples forthwith, returned to the vicinity of Genoa, where he had been erecting his house again, and after a few weeks' delay and inquiry, he started once more in search of the fugitives. He met with no success, however, and was unable, with all his cunning, to obtain a word of accurate information regarding Claudio or Francesca. At last, though he dreaded the peril of the undertaking, he resolved upon going to the mountains once more among his old haunts, where he would be able, haply, to meet with some of his former followers, who, perhaps, would give him such a clue to the whereabouts of his enemy as would afford him a meeting upon such terms as he could best arrange afterwards. With this determination, he left such directions for the finishing of his mansion as

were necessary, and departed upon his proposed journey. Within a fortnight he had learned all that he desired from communication with a straggler, whom he bribed, *en route*; and with high hopes, instead of returning to Genoa, he proceeded on towards Leghorn, with the full intention of arresting and denouncing Claudio as soon as he should chance to fall in with him. But he was not so easily trapped, and had not been idle, either, since his arrival at Leghorn.

On the third evening after the interview between Francesca and her husband, a gentleman called at their lodgings, and inquired if the Count Autienne could be seen—this title being the cognomen which Claudio still used for his temporary purposes. The Count chanced to be absent at the Opera, and the gentleman returned again three hours subsequently, to see him upon business of importance.

When the Count alighted from his carriage, the stranger stood quite near the door, and the attendant passed him the latter's card as he proceeded to his apartment. The gentleman followed him directly; and as Claudio read the name of Count Donati upon the card in his hand, he started; but the gentleman said:

“At your service, Count. Do you recollect me?”

The attendant retired, the door was closed, and the three old acquaintances stood together, not a little embarrassed or alarmed,—Claudio, Bernardo, and Francesca.

It was with the greatest difficulty that the

young wife found herself able to stand, for an instant; for she could not account for this strange and sudden apparition. As for her husband, his wits did not often desert him; but now he felt peculiarly ill at his ease, under the unexpected circumstances. Count Donati was stern, firm, impudent, and as cold as marble.

"I see you *do* recollect me, Count," he remarked, as soon as sufficient time had elapsed for a thorough recognition; "and as for you, Signora," he continued, turning severely to Francesca, "you, I think, cannot have forgotten Count Donati, your protector, friend, and legal guardian?"

Claudio, who by this time had recovered from the impression which the unanticipated presence of his enemy had caused, quickly answered:

"By what right, Signior, you intrude yourself upon my privacy, I am altogether at a loss to decide. I am here—"

"As the Count Autienne, nominally," said Donati, with warmth; "but really as an outlaw, a robber, for whose head there is a standing reward of five thousand ducats."

"And you are—?"

"Count Donati,—a man who comes hither with substantial credentials, which it is not now in your power to invalidate; and who has a long account to settle with a knave and a thief. As for the lady yonder—"

"She is my wife."

"She is my ward," responded Donati sharply; "and, as I live, she shall leave Leghorn in my charge."

"Never !" said Francesca bravely. "O Signior, she then added more timidly, "if there remain in your heart one spark of feeling for her whom you professed to have regarded as your child, I conjure you do not pursue us farther ; do not place my husband again in peril."

"Francesca !" exclaimed Claudio excitedly, "I desire that you retire at once, and leave us to adjust our business like men."

"No, no, no !" shrieked the wife, in miserable dread. "Do not urge me thus, Claudio ; do not drive me away. I beseech you, suffer me to remain beside you, whatever is to be the result of this painful meeting."

"You will grant my request, Francesca, on this occasion, I know," responded Claudio kindly.

"No, no ; I will not leave you, Rodolpho. By our love, our hopes, our promises, our faith, I beg you not to deny my presence here. I will be calm, dearest, and, since you wish it, will have nothing more to say."

"I have no secrets," interrupted Count Donati, addressing himself to Claudio ; "for your history is no longer a secret in Leghorn. I had sworn to be avenged on you, and the hour is come when your course of infamy is to be arrested. Already the chief of the police is informed of the true character of the self-styled Count Autienne, and my mission here is but brief. I demand possession of my ward ; and for you, traitor that you have proved, I leave you to the custody of the guard, which, at my instigation, is at this moment under this roof,"

A shriek of terror escaped the lips of the alarmed wife at this fearful announcement, which only preceded the sound of heavy footsteps, that could now be plainly heard in the passage-way.

What was to be done ? It was a terrible moment for Claudio, who saw no opening for escape ; he believed that his plans had been laid with such caution that Donati could not overtake him, — at least when he should be thus utterly unprepared for the event. It was a desperate position for him indeed !

If, in his emergency, he could have disposed of his wife even, for the time being, he could perhaps have resorted to some chance effort to contrive his deliverance from his present dilemma ; but, as it was, she could not fly with him ; and if he left her, he saw that she would be at Bernardo's mercy on the instant. The soldiers were at that moment approaching the door, the clank of arms could be heard, when his quick wit suggested a final resort, even as they advanced to seize him.

Drawing a heavy pistol from his bosom, he sprang forward, and with a single blow laid Bernardo senseless at his feet. Then, dashing the lamp from the table, which was instantly extinguished, he assumed the tone and character of his antagonist, and called lustily to the guard to advance to his aid, as he seized the arm of his wife, and went to the door.

"Quick !" he shouted, as the guard rushed into the darkened apartment. "Quick ! He has struck me ! Secure the villain ! quick !"

The officers approached the prostrate form of

Count Donati, supposing it to be that of the alleged outlaw ; and while they secured his person, raised him up, and obtained lights, two or three minutes passed away, during which time Claudio, with his frightened and half-fainting Francesca, had disappeared from the hall, and had actually left the house. It was a desperate moment ; but the end was not as yet.

Fortunately the darkness of the night favoured the progress of the fugitives. A stray cabriolet hove in sight as they turned into the second street, and the circumstance was quickly turned to their advantage. A golden bribe was thrust into the driver's hand ; and as Claudio lifted his wife into the vehicle, he said :

“Haste, driver, to the quay ! Put your horse to his best speed, and I will double what I have already given you.”

The cab started furiously, and in the space of ten minutes Claudio and his wife stood at the foot of the pier which shot out into the river. As the vehicle, on its return, passed out of sight above the quay, a small wherry was discovered by Claudio, secured at the capstan of the dock. Into this he placed his wife, and seizing the small oar, he pushed off at once quietly into the stream.

The current was running outward, and he soon descried a small vessel lying at anchor. He headed for this craft forthwith, and in a few moments he stood upon her low deck. Francesca spoke not, but clung to her husband's arm ; hoping for the best, but fearing the worse in prospective.

The captain of the little schooner was sleeping soundly in his berth, and dreaming quietly of aught but such a visit as this, when a hand was laid upon his shoulder, and, by the light of the little hand-lamp in his cabin, he suddenly found himself in the presence of a total stranger, who stood over him with a bag of gold in one hand, and a very suspicious-looking pistol in the other.

---

## CHAPTER XXXII.

## AN UNANTICIPATED VOYAGE.

As may well be supposed, the master of the schooner was not a little surprised, and quite as much terrified, at this sudden and curious call at midnight ; and his first impulse, since he was apparently at the mercy of the man who thus stood over him, was to cry out for help. On a second thought, however, considering the singular manner of his visitor, he concluded to do no such foolish thing. His eye fell upon the heavy purse that Rodolpho held forth towards him ; and as soon as he could well recover himself, after the first fright, he concluded to look again before he made any unnecessary disturbance.

“ Are you not the master of this vessel ? ” asked Rodolpho hurriedly.

“ Ye-s-s ! ” muttered the man. “ But, mercy ! you are not going to kill me at sight, are you ? ”

“ On the contrary, my good fellow, I would not harm you, be assured. But be stirring now ; I have a lady on deck.”



"A woman, too!"

"A lady, I said. Here is gold; and I have more in plenty. I want to use your vessel and your skill instantly. Take this purse as an earnest of my future intentions towards you, if you do my bidding. Come, do not hesitate; time presses; I have no leisure for dallying now."

"Well, what is your wish?" inquired the captain, springing out upon the floor, and securing the bag of gold at the same time.

"First, that you give up this cabin for the use of myself and the lady."

"O-ho! I see, I see! an affair of the — Well, never mind. An elopement isn't very bad; but—"

"Quick, then! and ask no questions. Call up your hands, and put to sea at once."

"Put to sea!"

"Instantly."

"And the lady?"

"Is my wife. I am hot pressed; and there is not a moment to be lost. You have provisions on board?"

"Yes, for a month's voyage."

"And water?"

"Yes."

"Set sail, then, forthwith; and you shall be handsomely paid for the service," said Rodolpho, in a hurried manner; and then, repairing to the deck, where his trembling wife awaited his return, he said: "Dearest Francesca, we are safe once more, at least from present harm. We shall sail hence immediately. All is arranged. I find the captain

a reasonable man ; and we shall escape again. Let us retire below."

There was a bustle about the deck immediately. All hands had been summoned from below ; and as it chanced that the vessel was a coaster, in possession of clearance-papers, she was enabled to depart from her anchorage whenever it pleased her commander, without exciting suspicion.

The schooner in which Claudio and his wife had found so secure an asylum would have started at dawn of day for Civita Vecchia ; but the wily captain said nothing of this fact, however, but rather gave them to understand that he sailed to accommodate him personally. At Civita Vecchia, accordingly, the schooner put in for a few hours, where fresh provisions and water were taken aboard, and where the letters of credit which the "Count Autienne" possessed were turned to account for his present purpose.

As the captain was intrusted with the business of obtaining the money Claudio desired, he was sufficiently acquainted with his passenger's finances to satisfy himself that there would be no risk in following his directions. Accordingly, when he returned on board, he at once asked his passenger what he desired further with him and his vessel.

In reply, he was instructed to make for the Bay of Naples as quickly as possible. This place was well known to Claudio, and he had previously placed certain property of some value in the hands of a friend there, with whom he desired to communicate. The voyage thither took but a short time,

as the schooner proved a fine sailer, and worked admirably. From thence the vessel sailed to Palermo, it being the intention of Claudio to settle there for some time at least, and arrange his affairs.

And while our hero and his beautiful young wife were thus putting a long distance of sea and land between them and their persecutors, there were other parties connected with our narrative, and other scenes enacting, to which we must now attend. Let us, therefore, return to Leghorn and look after Count Donati, whom we left in the custody of the vigilant police of that renowned city.

It turned out that Bernardo had laid his plans with precision and good judgment; but he could not forego the opportunity which he believed the circumstances of the case afforded him of seeing Claudio, and of personally denouncing him, after all the trouble he had had to find him. By means of the duplicity of one of his own clan, whom Donati had searched out among the mountains, he had been able to get a clue to his whereabouts; and having found him at last by means of his *alias*, the "Count Autienne," he lost no time in putting the authorities upon his track.

But Bernardo—the former master of Claudio, and his original instructor in crime—could not be content merely with the satisfaction to be derived from seeing the police perform their duty. He was not satisfied to know that Rodolpho would be arrested, easily convicted, and probably condemned to the galleys for life; but he must meet him once more, face

to face, and let him know to whom he was indebted for his final arrest. This was what the old robber gloated over ; and he would also tear Francesca from him, in the midst of his consternation, at the moment when the soldiery should pounce upon him at his hotel. Such was his plan, and we have already seen how *successful* it proved.

The better to enable him to carry out this scheme, he had provided himself with letters of credit upon the best bankers in Leghorn ; and he had also brought with him ample credentials of character from prominent citizens at Genoa, who had known him in that neighbourhood for some time. A retaliatory disposition on Claudio's part, after his arrest, would therefore have availed him nothing. Sufficient evidence had been prepared by Count Donati to fix a hundred crimes upon him ; and had he left the authorities to do their duty unmolested, he might have triumphed. As it was, his antagonist was more than an even match for him.

The reader will remember that we left the Count in the dark, surrounded by half a score of guards, in the apartment from which Claudio had so singularly made his escape. In the confusion which ensued, the soldiers rushed in and secured the man they chanced to find there. They were completely deceived by the assumed voice and manner of the young man ; and as it had been arranged between the guard and the Count Donati that, at the moment of Rodolpho's supposed arrest, the old Italian should secure the person of the young lady whom he claimed as his legal ward, they were thrown entirely off their guard

for a moment, as they supposed that Donati had taken possession of Francesca as they entered the room, and that all, of course, was proceeding as previously agreed upon. "Seize him! secure your prisoner!" Claudio had shouted, as he rushed by them with his wife; and they did secure the man who lay stunned upon the floor.

Lights were procured, and after a few minutes' delay Count Donati came to himself, and the unlucky *ruse* was discovered. Donati swore, and charged the guard with conniving with the scoundrel to escape. The officer of the guard retaliated, and threatened the Italian with arrest unless he kept a civil tongue in his head. In the mean time Claudio and his wife were increasing the distance between them and their pursuers.

The hotel was quickly ransacked by the police, and within half an hour spies were sent out in every direction in search of the fugitives. In vain was inquiry, in vain did the guard search every nook and corner, and put question after question to all whom they chanced to meet. The lucky pair had been seen by no one, and their retreat was perfectly successful. Count Donati was in a deadly rage; but he could not find the object upon which he desired to wreak his vengeance. They were far beyond the reach of his arm or his influence, and the lovers were now congratulating each other upon their good fortune in the cabin of the little schooner.

Count Donati left Leghorn as he came. He repaired at once to his residence near Genoa, and as soon as his new dwelling was completed, he once

more sat down to enjoy the luxuries of life which were still left him ; for, notwithstanding his disasters, he yet had a goodly amount of means at his command.

Return we now to Claudio and his beautiful Francesca. Arriving at Palermo, he paid the captain roundly for his trouble and faithfulness, took lodgings at a retired hotel for a few days, intending, as soon as his affairs were arranged, and Francesca had recovered from the fatigue and effects of the voyage, to travel until they found some quiet spot to their liking, and there permanently reside.

But while tarrying at Palermo, the welcome news reached Claudio that a full and free pardon had been granted by the government to all the clans of brigands who had infested the mountains, on condition that they laid down their arms and dispersed. This intelligence was of a very gratifying character to Claudio, who had been one of the most prominent of the offenders ; and he gladly availed himself of the opportunity thus afforded to free himself from future legal proceedings and jeopardy.

The news, therefore, changed his purpose somewhat ; and he at once took measures to communicate with his late followers, and the authorities also, and his sojourn at Palermo was consequently extended beyond the period he had originally intended.

Count Donati did not forget the purpose he had so near his heart, however. He returned to his villa, still determined, sooner or later, to have revenge upon the man who, he conceived, had so deeply wronged him. How he finally succeeded in his purpose, and

what was the fate of our characters, we will inform our readers in the following chapter.

---

## CHAPTER XXXIII.

### THE MAGICIAN—A FEARFUL RIDE.

As soon as the news had been circulated among the community of peasants who inhabited the borders of the infested districts, they, for their own future peace and comfort, took measures to communicate the fact to the bands that were located about them, that they might avail themselves of the offer of pardon, and retire from their unlawful pursuits.

The news was generally received by the robbers with gratitude, and a very large portion of the clans was soon broken up. Those who were reckless enough, however, not to accept the proffered lenity of the government were soon hunted down; and within a year's time the mountains were rid of those pests, who had for a long period previously occupied their caves and passes.

The mansion of Count Donati was finished at last, and a very showy and elegant one it was: his taste was good, and he did not spare expense; so that the dwelling which replaced the original was in every respect superior to the one that had been sacked and destroyed; and as soon as it was complete, he left it in charge of his secretary, and departed in search of Claudio, whom he still hoped to punish for having overreached him; and besides this he had a further design, to wit, the abduction or

the arrest of Francesca, whom he still loved, and who he believed was not the wife of his adversary.

Claudio was still at Palermo, awaiting the arrival of some chests, which he had stored at another point, in charge of an old friend, with whom he had lately communicated, and who had shipped the articles to the address of Signior Bletzer, Palermo, according to his letter of instructions.

On their arrival they were found to contain the gorgeous paraphernalia, the wardrobe, and the superb appointments that Rodolpho made use of at his magical exhibitions, and which were now about to be brought into requisition ; for his means were not over ample, his expenses and losses had been very large during the past few months, and upon his leaving the band he left behind him the great bulk of what of right belonged to him, at Francesca's solicitation. With his elegant wardrobe and fixtures, and his still unimpaired tact and knowledge of legerdemain, the road of fortune was open to him by an honourable route ; and he resolved to pursue it, and trust to his accomplishments for future success in his career.

This determination was suggested by his lovely wife, who was overjoyed when he informed her that a free pardon had been granted to himself and his unfortunate companions, and that from that time forward he should pursue his profession as a means of obtaining a livelihood.

He therefore determined, before leaving Palermo, to give a series of entertainments in the mystic art.

These were highly successful ; and he had nearly



finished his engagements, when Count Donati was ready to leave Genoa.

It chanced the evening before he left, that the old Italian, after having visited his banker, entered a coffee-room, and taking up a paper, his eye fell upon a paragraph which contained an unusual amount of interest for him under the circumstances. He slowly read it, as follows :

“A REMARKABLE MAN.—We have been highly gratified with the unique and artistic exhibitions of Signior Bletzer, who has delighted our citizens during the fortnight past with his elegant entertainments in the *art magique*, in which he may be pronounced a most accomplished professor, without show of flattery. His necromancy, his sleight of hand, his jugglery, and his various optical deceptions, are all of the most extraordinary character ; and, in our very limited experience, we have never met the man who could approach him in neatness of execution, or who could at all compare with him at successful experiment in the black art. He is certainly a most singularly fortunate person in these respects, and his success elsewhere cannot but be sure, wherever rare talent can be appreciated. We hear that on the close of his engagement he will make a tour in the country. We wish him success. Signior Bletzer is really an extraordinary man !”

“So he is !” exclaimed Count Donati, as he laid aside the journal from which he had so unexpectedly obtained the very information he most desired, and which he was at that very moment on the point of

leaving Genoa to obtain. "Yes ; he is an extraordinary being, to be sure ; but unless Fortune greatly abuses me, I think this time I shall make sure of my prey. Well, we shall see, we shall see—about shortly to make a tour, eh? Perhaps he won't go ; perhaps he may be detained. Well, we shall see ; and with these conflicting self-assurances Count Donati at once left the *café*, and prepared forthwith to visit the town of Palermo, to confront and punish his former lieutenant.

In the mean time Claudio was pursuing the even tenor of his way. He gave his entertainments still under the *nom de guerre* of Signior Bletzer, and was rapidly accumulating a large sum, and had thoughts of commencing his tour, when Count Donati, after reading the account we have quoted, left Genoa, and arrived at Palermo.

Amidst all his shiftings and changes and adventures, Claudio had constantly retained possession of his favourite black mare, "Peri." When he absented himself from the country, he always placed her in charge of a faithful person, who provided for her, and who took a pride in preserving her in fine condition constantly against the hour when her master might, at any time, send for her. This was a noble beast ; and next to his wife he loved his matchless "Peri."

Few men in Europe could manage a horse or ride one better than Claudio ; and this was a favourite exercise with him, for his wife was a magnificent horsewoman as well. Their excursions into the suburbs, on all convenient occasions, therefore, on

horseback, were frequent. They were entering Palermo one evening just at dusk, riding slowly along, when the palfrey upon which Francesca was seated became suddenly alarmed at some object at the roadside, and bolted unexpectedly. In her sudden attempt to recover the bit and bring her horse in hand again, the girth of her saddle slipped, and the lady instantly sprang to the ground to save herself. Rodolpho was at her side immediately, and the saddlestraps were at once tightened, and she sprang lightly into her seat again, as her steed turned about and started off at a gallop. As Claudio wheeled to mount his mare, he felt a sharp blow at the back of his head—from whence, or by whom, he had no idea; and as he fell senseless at the side of the road, a stranger jumped over his prostrate body into his saddle, and the mare dashed furiously away upon the track of Francesca.

It was some time before Francesca could stop her palfrey, which had been frightened by the sudden appearance of a man's form, which protruded from the side of the road, and which neither Claudio nor his wife had observed. That intruder was Count Donati, who had just reached Palermo, and having learnt the temporary whereabouts of those he sought, determined to wait upon them at once, and make the most of the advantages which might ensue in his favour, under the circumstances.

Claudio, stunned by the blow he had received, still lay unconscious of any thing, when the strange rider overtook Francesca. Evening had set in, and it was very nearly dark when the well-known Peri

dashed up to her side, and she noticed that the rider (whom she mistook for her husband) seized upon her palfrey's bit. She shouted at this act, which she supposed was to aid her, and said :

"Do not touch him, Claudio ; he is behaving very well. I am quite safe ; do not check him thus."

"Francesca," said a familiar voice, which penetrated to her very heart ; "halt, Francesca, and listen to my words."

Paralysed with terror, shocked at the sudden appearance of her guardian the Count, and deeply alarmed for her absent husband, poor Francesca could not speak for a moment. She looked back, then at her guardian, then at Peri, and thus she shrieked :

"Claudio ! Claudio ! my husband ! Where is he ? where is he ?"

"Hear me, Francesca," said Count Donati firmly. "You have escaped me thrice ; you cannot do so again. I have staked my all of hope and revenge upon this moment."

"Count Donati, tell me, is *he* hurt ?"

"Forward, Francesca ; you must accompany me *now* ! Claudio will not molest us at present, be sure of it. Forward, I say !" and the Italian drove his rowels deep into Peri's sides, while he still clutched the bit of Francesca's palfrey with an iron gripe ; and away dashed the horses side by side, the unfortunate wife scarcely realising where she was or what she was doing amid her terror and excitement.

Away went Peri at top speed for a few moments ; but she very soon discovered that she carried an un-

natural weight, and that the spurs that gored her flanks were altogether a new mode of impetus to her. The palfrey was like a fox ; and Francesca still kept her seat, bound whither she had no idea.

On dashed the guardian and his ward at a furious pace ; and poor Rodolpho, robbed of his wife without a moment's notice, lay for some time senseless upon the roadside, ignorant of the cause of his trouble, and utterly unconscious of what had been transpiring since he received the blow upon his forehead.

Forward, then, Donati ! It is your last chance. The game is a desperate one, and you may win ; but the chances are against you nevertheless. Have a care, too ; for the beast you ride has known the voice of a kinder rider for many a long month, and her proud spirit will scarcely brook the treatment you now offer her. The matchless Peri strode away at a terrible pace, and the palfrey upon which Francesca was seated still galloped on as fast as its legs could carry her ; while the desperate Italian drove his rowels into Peri's side, and continued still to shout, "Forward, Francesca ; forward ! There is no other course left you."

Five minutes is a long space of time for a man to be bereft of his senses ; and in five minutes of time, at the pace they travelled, the Italian and his captive must have gone a very considerable distance from the spot where Claudio had been struck down. But as there is usually an end to this sort of thing, so there was an end to his unconsciousness ; and when he came to himself partially, he half-rose, endeavoured to look about him, and call to mind

what had happened ; but his sensations were such, that he could not determine where he was, or what had brought him there. Suddenly, however, he sprang to his feet, jumped into the road, and cried :

“ Francesca ! my wife Francesca ! ”

The truth flashed upon his memory, and he be-thought him of the attack, the accident, and then all was chaos again. His horse was gone, his wife was gone, his enemy (whoever he was) was gone. He he was not badly hurt ; his purse was safe ; but he was entirely alone. What could it mean ?

He did not halt to make unnecessary and fruit-less inquiries ; but, as well as he was able, although still confused and dizzy, he staggered, half ran, along the road towards the town. Ah, how did he hope and trust that his poor wife had not been harmed, and that he should be able soon to greet her in safety ! He hastened on, therefore, and made the best of his way towards his hotel.

The fugitives had arrived within half a mile of the line of the town, when Peri became furiously excited from the repeated urgings and goings she had received from her unknown rider. Three or four times she had plunged and struck out, or leaped fearfully forward, as the rowels penetrated her tender sides ; but Count Donati maintained a good seat in the saddle, and still he pressed her on, when suddenly rearing, the palfrey cut her on the gambrel (being close behind her) ; she plunged madly out, and bolting, threw Count Donati with dreadful violence against a ledge of rock by the side of the path. Then turning, as she thus relieved herself of her un-

welcome burden, Francesca saw with painful horror that Donati's foot was thrust through the stirrup. Peri was quite as much alarmed as was the wife of Rodolpho, and wheeling once more, away she dashed, wildly, madly, desperately, with her late rider dangling at her heels. The work of death was brief but terrible. The horse only knew that some extraordinary event had occurred, and at a murderous leap she went off towards the stable in which she had been housed for several days. When she reached it, she dashed headlong into the courtyard, leaped the paling, and fell, covered with sweat and dust and blood, near the outer door.

The groom instantly caught her head, and aided her upon her feet. The foam dripped from her sides, and she was badly scarred. The head-gear was out of shape, one stirrup-strap was missing, the saddle was turned down under her belly ; and it was plain some shocking accident had taken place. Aid was sent out at once from the hotel in the direction that Claudio had been known habitually to take in his equestrian excursions, and matters were soon explained in a measure. The body of a man was found by the roadside awfully mangled and bruised, around whose right ankle there hung a stirrup, which matched the other in Pierre's saddle. But this man was a stranger. It was not the young Count, but an older person. How came he there? How could he have occupied the Signior's saddle? Where was the lady, too? There was plainly foul play in some way, and the people who huddled about the body became excited and curious.

"Send for a doctor," suggested some one in the crowd at last.

"Rather too late," replied another, taking up the man's hand; "he is dead."

A surgeon was sent for, however; the body was removed to a more suitable place for examination. But all was useless. Count Donati, the once supposed father of Francesca, and the sworn enemy of her husband, the bandit and robber, the celebrated chieftain Bernardo,—*was no more*.

But Claudio hurried along, and as he advanced the exercise rather aided him. He was all in doubt and confusion,—hopeful, yet fearing to know the result of this night's work, when he heard a horse galloping down the road towards him at a rapid rate from the direction of the town. As the animal approached nearer, he stepped a little aside, until (if he had a rider) he might be hailed, when he shouted, "Hi! hi!" which brought both palfrey and rider to a standstill, for that voice was well remembered.

"Claudio!" shouted Francesca in response, as she leaped from her saddle at a bound, "Claudio, my husband, are you safe? Are you not hurt? Speak, quick!"

"No, loved one; I am not hurt much. But where is Peri? Whence come you, and what does all this mean?"

"O Claudio, in one word I beg you hasten. Count Donati lies bleeding by the road not a hundred rods hence."

"Count Donati!"

"Yes, yes; do not pause now, do not ask a



question, I beseech you ; but haste—in humanity's name, hasten to aid him."

"How came *he* here?" said her husband confusedly, and insisting upon placing his wife in the saddle again. "Where did Count Donati come from, pray?"

"Away, Rodolpho. For *my* sake now away, and save him if possible," continued Francesca kindly. And in a very little time they reached the spot where lay the form of the once powerful robber, who had now ceased to breathe. In vain was sympathy, kindness, or surgical skill. The die was cast—Count Donati was dead. The body was removed, as we have stated, and a brief explanation took place. It was clear to the examining authorities that this man was upon the wrong horse, at any rate ; and it was quite as clear that he not only had no right there, but that his death occurred by being thrown and dragged against the rocky road. However, he was *dead* ; and they could not proceed further towards him, even if he had criminally possessed himself, for the time being, of Claudio's horse. So they suffered him to take charge of the mangled body, and the event was soon afterwards forgotten.

Francesca, though deeply agitated and alarmed, reached her hotel in safety at last, where she quickly explained the whole affair to her husband in detail. Claudio bore no malice in his composition ; and so, after hearing his wife's story, though he saw that Donati would have robbed him of Francesca, and left him to die by the roadside in order that he might thus triumph, yet the old Italian was now be-

yond harming him further, and he forgave him for the multifold injuries he had sustained at his hands, and went about the work of having his remains cared for in a suitable and respectable manner.

After some consultation between Claudio and his wife, such a version of the story of his death as seemed fit to them under the circumstances was prepared and published, to be sent to Genoa for the information of that community. This account stated, in general terms, that Count Donati came to his death by being run away with and thrown from his horse. And no questions were subsequently asked which were not readily answered in connection with this statement.

The body was placed in a leaden coffin, and afterwards in a wooden one ; and these were encased and sent forward at once to the villa of Count Donati, whither Claudio and Francesca resolved to follow the corpse, and give it a proper burial, having in view, also, an examination of Count Donati's pecuniary affairs, and a determination to look after his property, which they both supposed to be very valuable.

At an early moment, therefore, they proposed to leave Palermo ; and having sent forward their own luggage and Claudio's paraphernalia, they quitted the place which had been big with so important a turning-point in their existence, and journeyed towards Genoa at once.

---

## CHAPTER XXXIV

## THE MYSTERIOUS FRIAR.

THE voyage homeward was a melancholy one, for Francesca could not but look back with sorrow on the untimely end of Count Donati, whom at one time she had considered as her father, and who, despite his cruelty of late, had often shown her signs of affection and good-will. She believed that it was nothing but his inveterate hostility to Claudio, her husband, which had caused his late relentless persecution of her. When she again revisited the old town, and saw the familiar places and scenes among which she had been brought up, the memories of the past thronged before her ; she remembered her gentle, loving mother (at least, her whom she had always supposed to be her mother), the Countess Donati ; and then, too, there arose in fancy before her the image of her real parent, the "Woman in Red." It was not without causing an involuntary shudder that this latter presented itself ; for the remembrance of the Jewess was so blended in her mind with scenes of violence and sorrow to those she loved most dearly, that, though she believed firmly she was indeed her daughter, she could not bring herself to regard her with the affection a parent should command.

They were no longer poor now ; for, besides the moderate fortune Claudio could call his own, Fran-

cesca inherited all the wealth which Count Donati, the ex-brigand, had left behind him.

Accordingly her husband, anticipating her wishes, had made arrangements by which they came into possession of the Palace Donati, and she was installed as mistress in the home of her happy youth and maidenhood.

It might have been supposed that, under these circumstances, Francesca would have not only tasted, but enjoyed unalloyed happiness. Such, however, was not the case. A perpetual gloom hung over her life, which the tragic death of him whom she once supposed to be her father was quite insufficient to account for. The three years named by the Jewess had expired, and though she had not made her appearance to claim the fulfilment of Francesca's vow, still the young wife was troubled and anxious at heart, for she knew not on what day she might be called upon to renounce her husband or falsify her solemn oath. But day after day, week after week passed, and nothing arose to disturb the calm happiness of her life. Claudio was more affectionate and kind as a husband than he had ever been as a lover; and, but for the uncertainty and sense of insecurity in which she lived, her happiness would have been complete.

"Claudio," she said one day to her husband, "my heart misgives me; I have a sad foreboding—a presentiment of impending evil."

"What evil can befall us now, dear Francesca? Are we not secure in each other's love, and in circumstances above worldly want? Are we not sur-

rounded by faithful servants? and since we have returned to Genoa, and you have resumed your place as mistress in the Palace Donati, have we not made many friends? Are you not admired and praised as the reigning beauty of Genoa? Is not every luxury at our command—wealth, power, popularity? What, then, can give you cause of alarm, my Francesca?”

He took her fondly in his arms, as he thus endeavoured to console her; but, in spite of all her efforts to restrain her feelings, tears rose to her gentle eyes, and she wept on his shoulder.

“All that you say is true, Claudio. We are indeed in possession of every earthly blessing; and doubtless I am foolish and weak to give way to vague alarms; but I cannot help it. A terrible weight is on my soul—a knowledge of impending evil.”

“What is it you fear, dearest? Surely, after having passed through so many perils and misfortunes, Fate can have no more in store for us.”

“I scarce know what it is, Claudio; but during the last two or three days unquiet thoughts of the past have forced themselves on me; a vivid image of the scene which took place more than three years since is ever present to me: my poor lost mother, the Countess Donati,—for, despite my certain knowledge that she was not indeed my mother, I shall always regard her as such,—bowed down, crushed by her deep grief at the thought of losing me; then that other one, of whom (though I know I am indeed her daughter) I cannot think

without grief and terror,—her threatening manner and terrible denunciation yet haunt me. Do you not remember too, Claudio, the oath which I took—the solemn oath, by which I bound myself to return to her at the end of three years, when she should claim me? The three years have elapsed, but she has not appeared; nor have I heard aught of my poor lost mother, the Countess Donati.”

“Surely, Francesca dearest, you cannot think an oath extorted under such circumstances to be binding?”

*“An oath is registered in heaven, and is for ever binding; accursed be he or she who shall take the name of the Most High to a falsehood!”*

These words were spoken by a strange voice, in a deep, solemn tone.

Francesca screamed, and Claudio started to his feet.

There stood before them a tall figure, habited as a mendicant friar.

“What now, Sir Friar? Whence come you? and what want you here?” cried Claudio, in angry tones.

“I am a poor brother of the holy Order of St. Ignatius,” replied the friar. “I come from journeying to and fro on the earth, according to my vow. I am here to deliver a letter to this lady, Francesca, once called Donati, now the wife of Count Claudio.”

“From whom comes this letter?”

“I cannot tell you.”

"Will not, say rather."

"Will not, an' it please you. It amounts to the same thing."

"Then I will not suffer my wife to receive it."

"On your head be it."

Then the friar, bowing coldly, turned and left the saloon.

A chill fell on both their hearts, though neither could tell wherefore.

"O Claudio, that man's manner and looks frighten me! I fear you have done wrong in offending him, by refusing to let me receive his letter."

"I trust not. Who can he be? and what can be his errand to you?"

"I know not; and yet I feel as though I were destined to see him again."

---

## CHAPTER XXXV

### "THE TIME HAS COME."

DAYS passed; and setting no more of the mysterious friar, Francesca had almost dismissed the incident from her mind, when an event occurred which filled her with alarm.

Francesca had ever been a devout Catholic, and never failed to attend Mass and Vespers in the principal church of Genoa.

It was some few days after the unexpected ap-

pearance of the friar, that, as she was wending her way on foot to the church, as was sometimes her wont, she fancied she was followed by some person. Several times she turned round, and just caught a glimpse of a dark figure disappearing behind a pillar or round a corner. But in the gray evening light she was unable to determine with any certainty whether this was a man or woman, or but a phantasm of the imagination.

As she approached the church, she looked around and behind her, but saw nothing of the shadowy form which had alarmed her. Accordingly she entered the church, and, kneeling devoutly before the altar, commenced her devotions, praying aloud, —for at that time she was the only worshiper. Her devotions took the form of supplication for guidance. The conviction, presentiment, whatever it might be, each day grew stronger on her that some terrible calamity was about to happen. Her thoughts ran on the oath she had taken to leave all, and, when commanded, follow her mother, Rudiga the Jewess.

Of the Woman in Red, nothing had been seen for the whole three years since the establishment of the Count Donati was broken up. But many and strange rumours were rife concerning her. People spoke of her as living in the utmost magnificence in various Continental cities. At one time she was known as the Princess Sforza, and had a splendid palace at St. Petersburg; at another, she rented a large hotel in Paris, and astonished the Parisians by the magnificence of her equipages and the wealth displayed in her establishment



But at no time was she heard of in Italy ; and the only evidence of the Woman in Red in Genoa lay in the traditions of the inhabitants, and the presence of the old house, never since tenanted, in which the reputed sorceress had dwelt.

It was old and dilapidated in appearance without, even when the Jewess dwelt there : how much more so was it now, after having been closed for three years—windows broken, shutters destroyed, and with many holes in the roof, which exposed the interior to the weather.

The strange tales circulated by the superstitious people had effectually prevented the deserted house getting another tenant, and so it remained a dismal, dreary ruin amidst the palatial buildings which surrounded it.

The knowledge of all these strange rumours troubled Francesca exceedingly ; and as she knelt at the altar, the same strange feeling of impending sorrow oppressed her, and she murmured her prayer aloud for advice and guidance from on high. She knew not, rapt as she was in her devotions, that another person had entered the open doors of the church and, kneeling a few paces behind her, heard her murmured words.

“ My oath ! O Heavenly Father, blessed Virgin, and saints, guide me. My husband would prevail on me to believe it invalid. My conscience rejects the thought. To which shall I lend an ear,—to Claudio, who has my love, and should command obedience, or to a rash oath ? ”

“ *An oath to which the Most High has been called*

*to witness can only be broken at the cost of thy soul."*

Francesca nearly screamed aloud even in the sacred building. She needed not to look around, for she recognised the voice of the mendicant friar who had sought an interview with her at her home. Hastily concluding her devotions, she arose, and by a great effort subduing the agitation and trembling which shook her frame, beckoned the friar to follow her, and walked quickly out into the open air.

"I have seen you before," she said hastily. "What would you with me?"

"This."

He handed her a letter, and without another word, bowed, and, ere she could open it, was gone. The letter contained very few words, but those were sufficient to carry terror to the soul of the young wife.

*"The time has come ; remember your oath."*

Her heart sunk within her. Her face assumed a deadly pallor, and her limbs almost failed to support her.

"I knew it ; I felt it," she cried, crushing the paper in her hands. "The time has come, and I have to choose between my husband and my mother. Heaven guide me !"

Then, with slow and tottering steps, she returned to her home. Count Claudio could not fail to notice and be alarmed by her pallor and the look of anxiety which pervaded her beautiful features. He questioned her, but was answered only by sobs and words of deep love and devotion to him. She clung

around his neck, holding him in a passionate embrace, as though she feared he would be torn away from her. All this was a mystery to Claudio. But he was destined soon to read the solution.

---

## CHAPTER XXXVI.

### THE PRINCESS ESMERALDA.

ALL Genoa was ringing with the tidings that a foreign princess of immense wealth had come among them, and had taken one of the largest and most handsome mansions in the city.

For days before she herself arrived with her personal suite, her agents and couriers had been scouring the town, ordering and paying liberally for the best of every thing. The most costly wines procurable, the richest furniture and hangings, were ordered to be sent at once. There was no bargaining or dispute about the price, but the sellers were paid at once in gold the amount of their demands by the steward of the Princess.

Days before the Princess Esmeralda (for so she was called) arrived, the whole city was in a *furor* of delight. Her wealth was reputed fabulous, her munificence unbounded. As to who she was or whence she came, none could say. Her agents and servants were mute as the dumb, and all that could be gathered from them was that their mistress was the "Princess Esmeralda."

Count Claudio and Francesca did not fail to

hear the reports rife of the new arrival with fabulous wealth, but neither attached any importance to it. The alarm consequent on the mysterious letter given her by the friar had by degrees subsided, and Francesca now felt inclined to laugh at her former fears. She and her husband were seated one evening on the balcony of the palace enjoying the balmy summer air and each other's company, when a servant approached with the news that an outrider had arrived and announced that the Princess Esmeralda would do herself the honour to call upon Count Claudio and his wife immediately on her arrival in Genoa. Both were amazed at this information. Why should this Princess of fabulous wealth select them for her first visit? There were many nobles wealthier and in a higher position than Count Claudio. What meant this singular selection? It was a mystery only to be solved by the Princess, and as such each dismissed it, awaiting in some curiosity the result. They had not long to wait. Within an hour after the arrival of the courier, a splendid equipage drove into the courtyard of the Palace Donati. It was dusk; and though the balcony on which Claudio and Francesca were seated looked out on the open space in front of the palace, they could not discern the features of their visitor as she stepped from the carriage. They both arose, and walked into the saloon together to receive their distinguished visitor, with whose praises all Genoa rang.

The large apartment was brilliantly lighted. Wax tapers gleamed from every pillar and along the

wall, while a large candelabra with a hundred lights suspended from the ceiling formed the centre-piece. The folding-doors leading from the grand staircase are thrown open, and two domestics, each bearing a wax light, conduct the Princess into the presence of Claudio and his wife. They advance to receive their visitor, and see approach them a tall lady, attired in a robe of rich Venetian velvet of a deep purple hue. Her carriage is grand and graceful; but over her face is a veil of fine lace, which partially conceals her features. But this disguise, flimsy though it be, is quickly thrown on one side. She advances into the centre of the room and unveils.

*"I am here! The time is come! Naomi, my daughter, I come to claim thee!"*

A faint shriek broke from the wife of Count Claudio. She and her husband recognised at once Rudiga the Jewess, the Woman in Red.

---

## CHAPTER XXXVII.

### THE WOMAN IN RED CLAIMS HER DAUGHTER.

THERE was a deep and solemn silence for some time, which was broken by the Jewess.

"Naomi, my child, I have come to claim the fulfilment of your vow. For three years and two months my eyes have not fallen on the face of my daughter. For three years have I been roaming about the world, endeavouring to purchase forgetfulness by gaiety and luxury. In vain. Thy image,

O Naomi, ever rose before my eyes. Thy memory, the knowledge that another claimed your love, turned all the sweets of life to gall. But all that is past; the stipulated time has elapsed, and now I come to claim my daughter, not as Rudiga the Jewess, the Woman in Red, but as Esmeralda, the Eastern Princess of fabulous wealth. Naomi, dear Naomi, you know not what I, your mother, will do for you. Your brow shall glitter with a diamond tiara of priceless worth; strings of costly pearls shall hang around your neck; your arms shall be bedecked with bracelets of gold set with rubies and sapphires, for which empresses would give their crowns; your hair shall glisten with gems; your dwelling shall be of marble and porphyry; you shall take your food off vessels of massive gold, and a hundred servants shall but await your slightest sign to do your pleasure. Come, Naomi, come to your mother."

But the girl faltered, and drew back towards Claudio.

"You will not?" said the Jewess plaintively. "Have you, then, no word of greeting, of kindness, of pity, for your unfortunate parent, whose life has been one long sorrow? O Naomi, Naomi, this is indeed cruel."

"Yes, yes," cried Naomi, clasping her hands and gazing wildly from her husband to her mother. "I have pity, I have deep sorrow in my heart for you, mother,—for such I know you are. But what can I do? Claudio, my husband,—I cannot leave him."

A frown as black as night settled on the brow of

the Jewess. Her eyes gleamed fiercely on Count Claudio.

"Yes," she muttered between her teeth; "I knew that this audacious upstart had dared to wed my daughter without my consent. I knew it, but resolved not to break my plighted word, nor to appear before you till after the expiration of the time. Now I come to claim my daughter, and charge her, by virtue of the oath she took, to leave all—husband, home—and follow me, her mother. Naomi, I demand the fulfilment of your vow; nor dare to perjure yourself, under pain of eternal damnation."

The poor child's heart was racked by a conflict of terrible emotions. On the one hand, her love for her husband and home bade her refuse compliance; on the other, the remembrance of the solemn vow she had taken made her tremble at the thought of breaking it.

"Speak, Naomi," said the Jewess sternly. "I command you to come with me. Dare you refuse?"

"Oh! no, no. I cannot, I cannot. Spare me."

"Your oath, Naomi,—you dare not break it."

"My oath—ah! It is true, I dare not forswear myself. Claudio, husband, you hear what she says; I must obey."

"Never!" interrupted Claudio passionately. "An oath extorted as this one was is never binding."

"An oath is and must be for ever binding. Naomi, your answer. In the name of the Almighty, whom you called to witness, I charge you to forsake this man, your husband, and follow me. Your oath—remember your oath, nor dare to break it."

"Francesca," cried Claudio, seizing her arm, "be not imposed on or frightened by this woman. You shall not leave me."

"I claim my daughter, and appeal to her to fulfil her vow."

"And I claim my wife, and aver that no one can or shall come between me and her. Francesca, speak ; tell this woman that your place is with me, your husband, and that no rash oath can compel you to leave me. Tell her that, by the law of the land, the husband has control over the wife. Speak, Francesca, and tell her this."

"Ay, speak, Naomi, and tell this impious man that human laws avail nothing against the will and law of the Almighty ; and He says, '*Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain ; for He will not hold him guiltless that taketh His name in vain.*' Naomi, your answer. Wilt thou perjure thyself and doom thy soul to everlasting perdition, or return to thy mother, to whom alone you owe obedience ?"

The poor girl, in an agony of grief and uncertainty, threw herself on her knees, and with clasped hands implored the aid and guidance of Heaven. Torn by conflicting emotions, she knew not what to do. On the one hand, her love for her husband, and his express command to her not to listen to the Woman in Red, her mother, inclined her to resist her demand ; but on the other hand was the memory of the terrible vow she had taken,—a vow from breaking which her soul recoiled in horror.

Rudiga, her mother, stood on one side of



the kneeling girl ; Claudio, her husband, on the other.

“ Speak, Naomi,” cried the Woman in Red ;  
“ be true to yourself and your vow.”

“ Speak, Francesca,” said Claudio ; “ be true to your love and to me.”

A terrible conflict raged in her bosom. On the one side was love and her husband ; on the other, her oaths, her duty. Convulsive sobs broke from her as she knelt thus, racked by grief and uncertainty ; but ultimately her religious feeling and sense of what she thought right prevailed. She arose to her feet, calm, pale as death, but with unalterable determination on her beautiful features. Turning to the Woman in Red, she said, with forced calmness :

“ Mother, for such I know you to be, you have conquered. Though my heart break in the effort, I will keep my vow, and obey you.”

With a wild cry of delight, Rudiga, or, as she is now known, the Princess Esmeralda, rushed forward and threw her arms around her daughter.

“ My child, my child, my restored child ! I knew that the voice of nature would speak, and that you would return to me.”

With a cry of fury Claudio started forward, as if to tear his wife from the arms of her mother. But the Jewess waved him off with one hand by a threatening gesture, while with the other she encircled the slender form of Francesca.

“ Back, man ! You are powerless against the will of God and the promptings of nature. The girl is my daughter ; and though robbed of her from

infancy, nature now reasserts her claim, and in her name and mine I defy you."

She stood thus for a moment or so defiantly regarding him, and then suffering her arm to drop, she released her daughter.

"I fear you not now. The die is cast, and I have won, and you, who would have robbed me of my child, have lost the game. She is mine—mine only, whenever I please to claim her and bear her away."

"That shall never be, accursed sorceress."

"Claudio," said Francesca mournfully, "curse her not; remember that she is indeed my mother, and has been deeply wronged."

"She is not your mother, Francesca. It cannot be; you are deceived; it is a vile imposture."

"It is no imposture, Claudio. Heaven knows how my heart bleeds at the thought of separation from you, my husband; but I have sworn a solemn oath, and until she, my mother, shall please to release me therefrom, I am not free to act. It must be as she says."

"And do you, too, turn against me,—wife of my bosom, life of my life? Enough; I will go."

Then, stifling the choking sobs which rose in his throat, Claudio hurried away, nor paused, although Francesca called after him in heartrending accents.

"Claudio! Claudio! Come back. Forgive me; I knew not what I said."

She could not follow him herself, for the arm of her mother around her waist restrained her.

"Alas, he is gone ! I shall never see him more. My husband, my dear husband !"

With these words she tore herself away from her mother, and, throwing herself on a couch, gave way to her grief in a passionate burst of tears.

"Naomi, my child, grieve not for him. I am with you ; and am not I your mother ?"

"Yes, yes," she sobbed ; "I know it, and wish to do my duty ; but it is hard—it is very cruel—to demand of me such a sacrifice,—to compel me to give up husband, home, the associations of my childhood—all I hold dear. It is very hard."

The Jewess regarded her daughter's grief at first with a stern look ; but as she noted how the deep sobs were torn from her bosom by excess of agony, her heart relented.

"I cannot falter in my purpose ; I will not. This man stands between me and the sole object of my life,—my daughter's love. Once I have gained that, I may relent ; but for the present there can be no peace between him and me. I must, I will, part them."

Nevertheless, though these stern thoughts passed through her mind, she could not view the poor girl's heart-breaking sorrow unmoved.

"Naomi, my child, do not grieve," she said, endeavouring to raise her from her recumbent position on the couch where she had thrown herself in her bitter grief.

"Leave me," gasped the girl through her sobs. "Leave me now. I will keep my vow, and do your

bidding. I would be alone for a little while, to pray and ask counsel from Heaven."

"I go," said the Woman in Red, "at your request. When I return, it will be to take you with me."

Francesca gave a mute sign of assent; and the next moment she was alone with her sorrow.

The Princess Esmeralda returned to the splendid residence she had taken, and astonished her servants by giving orders to make preparations for instant departure from the city. Carriages and horses were ordered, luggage packed, and couriers sent on ahead, with orders to provide relays of horses on the road.

There was great consternation among the household of the magnificent Princess; but none dared question her, or hesitate in promptly obeying her commands.

---

## CHAPTER XXXVIII.

### FRANCESCA DESERTS HER HUSBAND.

LET us for a time follow the steps of Count Claudio, the unhappy husband of Francesca, or rather Naomi, the daughter of Rudiga.

Driven almost frantic by grief and anger at hearing his wife, as he thought, side unjustly with the Jewess against him, his first impulse was to put as great a distance as possible between himself and the scene of what he considered his disgrace and unmerited contumely. He walked quickly on,

chafing and fuming, and vowing that, since Francesca chose to desert him for this woman, who claimed to be her mother, she might do so; he would renounce her, as she had offered to desert him. She was false, fickle, and tired of him: and he, on his side, could play as independent a part.

Presently, as he walked on, he passed the door of the gaming-house where, more than three years previously, he had lost the remnant of his fortune on the night when he had decided to join with Count Donati and take to the mountains. He passed the door, hesitated, then walked on a little, and again stopped; finally his evil genius prevailed, and, turning back, he stood on the threshold. For a little while he yet paused, and his thoughts flew back home to his wife. Should he return, and endeavour to reason with her? Pride loudly said, "No; away with the thought!" He would return later, when, perhaps, alarm at his unwonted absence might cause her to be in a more reasonable state of mind—more ready to listen to him, and not inclined to obey the preposterous command of the Woman in Red, whom he tried to think an impostor.

And so Count Claudio strode boldly up into the saloon where his ruin had been before consummated.

He noted not that a dark figure, enveloped in a heavy cloak, had been closely following him, nor that this same person entered immediately behind him, and took a seat by his side.

It seemed quite accidental, and Claudio thought

nothing of it when the stranger, a well-dressed man of about the middle age, addressed him.

“ Will you play, Signior ? ”

Claudio saw that the public table was quite full, and, glad of some means of diverting his mind from the painful subject which engrossed it, at once accepted the offer, and moved to a small table in a retired corner.

The stranger at once proposed a high stake, and Claudio, though somewhat surprised, offered no objection. It was at once evident to him that his opponent was a complete novice at the game ; and the Count won the stake with great ease. Apparently annoyed at this, his antagonist proposed yet a larger stake ; and again the young noble won. Furious, it seemed, at this, the stranger challenged him to play for five times the amount, and he, being the winner, did not refuse. Again he won ; and his antagonist, swearing furiously, called for wine, and proposed to change the game.

Claudio was now a considerable winner ; and as the night wore on, he began to feel deeply anxious as to Francesca ; for though at the first, piqued and angry, he tried to persuade himself he was indifferent, such was far from the fact. He had left her with that terrible Jewess, who claimed to be her mother ; and now that he was calmer, he reproached himself for his folly. For he might well dread her influence when she had Francesca to herself, in the face of the fact that, even in his presence, her power had been sufficient to cause his wife to acknowledge the validity of her rash vow.

Had he been a loser, he would at once have risen and left the table ; but being a large winner, he could not honourably do so.

Again they played, and again he won ; and now he found that he was ten thousand ducats richer than when he entered the saloon.

His antagonist, now apparently furious at his heavy loss, proposed that they should play five games for ten thousand ducats a game. The stake seemed enormous even to one so reckless as Count Claudio had proved himself. Nevertheless he consented, arguing that he would be sure to win at least two games out of the five, which would leave him in the same position as when he commenced. It seemed almost a certainty that he must win a majority of the games, for he had from the first discovered that the stranger played a far inferior game to himself.

Accordingly the game for these high stakes commenced. A crowd, attracted by the great sum being played for, gathered round them ; and even Claudio, ill at ease and anxious to be away as he was, felt his pulse quicken as he looked on the great heap of money which the stranger had freely staked on the issue of the match.

They played ; and, strange to say, fortune, which had hitherto favoured him, took a decided turn, and, despite his antagonist's inferior play, he won the first game of the five with the greatest ease.

This somewhat surprised Claudio ; but he had no fear for the result, as he felt sure he would at least win two of the remaining four.

Again they played, and again fortune was false to him ; for his opponent won with even greater ease than before.

Claudio now began to look serious. Should his opponent again win, it would involve a certain loss of ten thousand ducats. His hand was more nervous, and his gaze more eager, as the next bout was being decided.

Again he lost ; the stranger thus winning back the ten thousand he had lost, and twenty thousand to boot.

It now became serious. If he did not win one of the two remaining games, he would be a loser of forty thousand ducats,—a sum which, at the present juncture, would very nearly beggar him.

Again he essayed his fortune, and again he lost. His antagonist played now with the luck and skill of the fiend himself. Claudio was deadly pale, and the perspiration stood in large beads on his forehead. He played on the last game, and, as before, lost.

“Sir,” he said to the winner, with forced calmness, “you are a winner of forty thousand ducats. I have only bills and gold to the amount of twenty thousand with me ; I will give you my note-of-hand for the balance.”

The stranger bowed politely, and declared he was perfectly willing to play on, and would himself oblige Count Claudio with gold for his note-of-hand for any amount.

The demon of gambling had now full possession of the mind of Count Claudio. He determined to



retrieve his desperate loss, if possible ; and with that view played on recklessly, and without judgment, as, under the circumstances, is usually the case.

Morning dawned on the gamblers, and found Count Claudio a loser of some sixty thousand ducats, for which amount he had been compelled to give his note-of-hand. The stranger rose from the table, assured Count Claudio that he could pay him at his convenience, bowed politely, and took his leave.

Then it occurred to Claudio to inquire who the wealthy and mysterious player was, who made so light of such a vast sum.

The answer struck consternation into the soul of the Count. He was informed that the stranger was the confidential steward of the Princess Esmeralda—the Woman in Red. A sudden conviction forced itself on his mind that he had been duped.

He rose hastily, and, leaving the house, hurried home. The great gates of the Palace Donati were wide open. He entered, and ascended the grand staircase. The saloon was littered with wearing-apparel and luggage, as though some of the inmates had been preparing for a hasty journey.

A chill fell on his heart. He ran to his wife's room. It was empty. He found there a note for him, containing these words only :

*“Adieu, Claudio ; Heaven bless you ! Fate has separated us. May it some day reunite us, is the earnest wish of your unhappy wife*

“FRANCESCA.”

Frantic with grief and fury, he aroused his ser-

vants, and demanded of them what had occurred, and whither their mistress had gone.

They informed him that at midnight the Princess Esmeralda drove up in a chariot and four horses, attended by a large retinue. The Lady Francesca hastily packed a few boxes with wearing-apparel, entered the chariot alone with the Princess, and then all drove off at a rapid pace.

Claudio gave vent to a wild cry of despair.

"To horse!—in pursuit! The Lady Francesca has been decoyed away. To horse! let every steed be saddled, and every man mount. I will rescue her yet from this accursed woman."

But, alas, it was too late. None knew which direction the Princess had taken, and, besides, she had a clear start of five hours.

It was not for some days afterwards that Count Claudio heard the fate of his young and lovely wife.

But we will reserve this for another chapter.

## CHAPTER XXXIX.

### THE COUNTESS DONATI VISITS FRANCESCA.

WHEN Count Claudio went out, burning with rage and wounded pride, he did not stop to consider the consequences. Francesca his wife had avowed her determination to obey the commands of the Jewess, and at her bidding separate herself from him. This was enough. He stayed not to reason or think, but, hot-headed as ever, hurried away, and, reckless of every thing, sought his own ruin.

Meanwhile Francesca and her mother were left alone together. It need scarcely be said that the Jewess, with but one object in view, improved the opportunity to increase her power over the young wife.

Francesca, ever yielding and dutiful, did not attempt to dispute the point with her, but consented to fulfil her vow, and accompany her whenever she should choose to demand her.

Having received a promise from her daughter to be in readiness in two hours' time, the Princess Esmeralda took her leave.

Francesca was again alone. She had dismissed her waiting-maids, preferring to remain the short time yet left before she should leave her home for ever alone with her thoughts. Where was Claudio? She longed to see him, and bid him farewell. But, alas, he had left her in her extremity, and she would have to bid adieu to him only in thought.

The lamps in the luxurious saloon burned dimly as the hours passed, and still the mistress of that palatial residence lay on a couch, her face hid in her hands, weeping bitterly.

The loud clanging of a bell aroused her from her sorrowful lethargy. She started to her feet, and just looking at the jewelled watch she carried, listened.

It wanted yet an hour of the time when the Woman in Red should return. Could it be that she had come earlier than she said? While she thus debated with herself, one of her waiting-women hurried in and informed her that a lady, who refused to give her name, demanded immediate audience of her.

"My God, what new trouble!" murmured poor

Francesca. "Who can this be who calls at such an hour? No matter, I will see her."

She seated herself to receive the stranger, little thinking who it was.

"Francesca, my sweet love, you have not forgotten me?"

With a cry of astonishment she started up, and, running to the speaker, was the next moment clasped in the arms of her whom she had, till the Jewess put in her claim, considered in the light of a parent.

When the first excitement of the meeting had passed over, Francesca and her foster-mother proceeded to relate to each other all that had happened since they parted.

"Why, oh, why have you left me so long, O my mother?" cried Francesca. "You know not what misery, what perils, what hardships, I have endured since I left Genoa with you, more than three years back!"

"You ask me, Francesca, why I have kept aloof from you. Alas, you know not all; for your sake, for the sake of the Count Donati, who has now gone to his last account, I dared not see you—dared not even communicate with you. Years ago I despised and defied that terrible woman, your mother. Now I fear her, and with reason. At any time up to the day of his disastrous death, the Woman in Red could have brought the Count Donati to a felon's doom; and though he is not your father, Francesca, yet he is *my husband*. Great as is my love for you, my daughter, I cannot forget my marriage-vow. Despite the wicked, lawless life of my husband my heart

still yearned for him ; and knowing, as I did, that this terrible woman held his fate in her hand, I dared not refuse to obey her."

"Dared not?"

"No, dared not. You do not know all, Francesca. Listen, and I will tell you : More than three years ago, your mother (I hate to say the word, and yet I must) wrung from me the confession that you were not my daughter, and proved her own right, of which, alas, *I* was convinced before. She consented to waive her claim on you for three years ; but that very night the Count my husband returned, and completed in a gaming-house the ruin of his fortunes. Then, as doubtless you know, he took to the mountains with your graceless husband, who—"

"Mother, not a word against Count Claudio. Whatever he may have been, he is now my husband."

"By the sale of jewels, and what little property was left to me after the final crash, I realised a considerable sum, and fondly flattered myself that I might live in peace and obscurity with you, my adopted daughter. We left Genoa for Paris; and, as you remember, Francesca, I was taken ill on the road, and compelled to make a long stay at Turin. Just as I was recovering, and thinking of pursuing our journey, an event occurred which changed the whole current of my existence. I was alone ; you, I think, had gone for a walk. One of the attendants at the hotel informed me that a lady wished to see me. I ordered her to be admitted, and in a brief space there stood before me your mother—your terrible mother—the Woman in Red."

Francesca gave a slight shudder in spite of herself. The very words, the "Woman in Red," struck a chill to her soul. To her they were pregnant with sorrow and ill-omen.

The Countess continued: "She addressed me at once in an abrupt and stern manner.

" 'Where is Naomi ?

" 'She is out,' I replied.

" 'You must see her no more after to-day. She must leave you.'

" Despite my weakness, my unconquerable terror of the woman, I braved her anger and defied her.

" 'She shall not leave me,' I cried passionately, 'unless she herself decides so to do. I will appeal to the authorities, to the law, to protect us from your persecution.'

" 'You will appeal to the law ?' she said sarcastically. 'Good ; come with me to the office of the Commissary of the Police.'

" 'Come with you ?—never !' I replied.

" 'Come with me, and I will show you your husband.'

" 'My husband ?

" 'Yes, Count Donati. To-day a prisoner, to-morrow condemned to death, the next day shot.'

" A cry broke from me.

" 'You do not believe me,' she said, with a terrible smile. 'Come with me.'

" 'I will come,' I replied excitedly ; 'and if your words prove false, it is you who shall be punished.'

" She only laughed ; and in a few minutes we were at the police-office. I know not by what means

she obtained the power, but her word was all sufficient there. I suppose the boundless wealth she possesses proved her passport. She said a few words to the official in attendance, and we were at once conducted along a corridor. Arrived at the end, a cell-door was thrown open, and I beheld my husband, loaded with chains.

“‘Behold!’ she cried triumphantly, ‘and know that I speak truth.’

“A few words from the unfortunate Count Donati convinced me that she had in no way exaggerated. He would infallibly be condemned, and suffer death, could he not escape. She offered an alternative—a means by which he might avoid his otherwise certain fate: that was, that I should relinquish you. I reminded her of her promise. She replied, that until the expiration of the time agreed upon (three years) she would not claim you, but neither should I have possession of you; you should be handed over to the custody of the Count Donati, now a felon, condemned to death. Such was her will. She promised, moreover, to compass the Count’s escape to the mountains, and provided that you should be sent to him by a trusty messenger. Then this imperious woman compelled him to take an oath to abandon his lawless life, and live in quiet and obscurity with you, who had been supposed his daughter, until it should please her to come and claim you. I had no choice but to consent; and he, with an ignominious death staring him in the face, was but too glad to embrace the offer.

“I returned to the hotel in fear and trembling,

and the first news I heard in the morning was, that a prisoner had escaped from the gaol—a noted bandit called Bernardo. At noon a messenger called with a note, bidding me send *you* with the bearer. I dared not disobey, but could not meet you myself; so, without even bidding you farewell, I left a letter commanding you to commit yourself to the stranger's care, and myself hurried to Paris, miserable, broken-hearted, and broken-spirited. Hence, dear Francesca, my apparent desertion of you.

“The Count my husband shortly renounced his lawless life; but still I dared not come to you. Day by day I witnessed evidences of *her* power; and she had warned me, that if I sought an interview, it should be the signal for the ruin of all—of me, of my husband, and of *you*. Continually I saw and heard of her. Her wealth appeared boundless; and the power that wealth gave her, skilfully handled, was enormous. Her spies, her emissaries, were every where; and convinced that, should I attempt to thwart her imperious will, it would be alike useless and disastrous, I resigned myself to my fate.

A short time back I heard of my husband's untimely death in Sicily, and your marriage with Claudio. I was informed that you had again returned to Genoa, and were living happily. Of her I had heard nothing for a long time; and as the three years had elapsed, I again hurried to embrace and claim my daughter.”

“Alas, too late!” exclaimed Francesca sorrowfully. “My mother has been here; she has this



evening sought me out, and claimed the fulfilment of my vow. I dare not refuse. The three years have elapsed ; I must go with her. I have sworn it. Hark !”

There was heard the rolling of carriage-wheels and the clatter of horses’ hoofs.

“ She comes !” cried Francesca.

“ Who comes ?”

“ My mother.”

“ Rudiga, the Woman in Red ?”

“ Yes—yes. She is called the Princess Esmeralda now.”

“ I cannot see her, Francesca. I dare not. I fear her. Let me escape. I have sworn not to see you without her consent, and dread her vengeance. Let me escape !”

Francesca conducted her along the corridor to a flight of steps which led into the grounds at the back of the palace.

“ Follow this staircase, and it will conduct you into the garden. There you can pass into the road by the wicket. Haste ! I too dread her meeting you.”

The Countess pressed her in her arms for a moment in a close embrace, and hurried away, just as the Princess Esmeralda and her suite ascended the grand staircase into the saloon.

---

## CHAPTER XL.

## ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL.

BEAUTIFUL Venice, the queen of the sea ! The splash of the oars, and the harmonious chanting of the gondoliers, mingled occasionally with the tinkling of a guitar as some love-sick swain serenades his lady-love, alone break the stillness of the night. The moon shines clear, bright, and beautiful on the grand old city, with numberless canals serving as roads.

It wants three hours of midnight, and the palace of the Princess Esmeralda is brilliantly illumined ; for the birthday of her daughter Naomi is being celebrated with great pomp and display. A thousand lights glitter in the gorgeous residence of the *millionaire* Princess. The most costly viands, the rarest wines, deck the tables ; and all the wealth and nobility of Venice are present at the *fête*. Occasionally there bursts forth on the stillness of the night ravishing strains of harmony, played by the most accomplished musicians to be procured for money.

But amid all the splendour and glitter there is one heart bowed down with grief and sorrowful memories.

Naomi, the only daughter of the Princess Esmeralda, refuses to take any part in the gay and glittering festivities in her honour. In vain her fond mother begs and implores her to arouse herself

from her lethargy, and at least come among the company for a short time.

"Mother, I cannot; my heart would break; I should burst into tears in public. Leave me—oh, pray leave me alone to my own wretched thoughts!"

With a deep sigh, the Princess was compelled to leave her, and return to her company.

Naomi—whom in the earlier part of this tale the reader has known as Francesca Donati—remains seated, pale, weary, and disconsolate in her own room, looking over the canal. The chamber is on the basement story, and from the low window it is easy to step out into a gondola moored beneath. The fair young girl is seated at this window, leaning her head on her hand, lost in sad thoughts of the past, when her attention is arrested by the sound of a guitar accompanying a rich and mellow voice.

She listens intently for a moment, and then leans out of the window, as though endeavouring to catch sight of the gondola from which the strains proceed. A flush is now on her usually pale cheek, and her eyes gleam brightly.

"Again," she mutters, half-aloud; "this is the third time I have heard that air chanted by the same voice. The melody—I know it well; it is one my poor lost mother the Countess Donati taught me. How often have we not, with Claudio, sung it together! What can it mean? Do my ears deceive me? or is that the voice of Claudio, my husband?"

Her heart beat wildly as she asked herself the question, Could it indeed be he? Had he traced her, and taken this means of informing her of his

presence? On the previous nights, when she had heard the same melody sung by the same voice, others were present; so she was forced to conceal the deep emotion which thrilled her soul. Now, however, all in the palace of the Princess Esmeralda were too much engrossed in the festivities going on to heed a serenade from a solitary gondola.

Slowly the craft from which came the voice approached. Francesca could hear the splash of the oar as the gondolier impelled her with measured and monotonous strokes, which seemed to keep time to the music.

Soon she could distinguish the shape of the vessel as it bore down towards her, and was able to make out three figures on board. One was the gondolier, who stood up and plied the paddle; the other two were seated beneath the awning; and Naomi's heart thrilled with a strange emotion as she fancied she recognised in one the figure of her lost husband, Count Claudio.

The gondola swept slowly by; and as it passed in front of her window, the moon streamed full on the faces of the passengers, and Naomi could plainly make out that the one was a tall and handsome young man, the other a middle-aged lady. In the one she knew her husband: in the other, the Countess Donati, whom she loved as fondly as though she had been indeed her mother. She watched the boat glide placidly by; and then, stretching forth her arms to the water, she gave vent to a cry of despair.

“Claudio—mother! do not leave me.”

The tinkling of the guitar, and the mellow sound of his voice as he chanted the mournful air, were the only reply, and the gondola swept slowly on. Soon it grew faint to sight, and the strains of the melody faded on her ear, till it was lost in a distant tinkling, like that of a tiny bell.

She uttered a sharp cry of misery, and burying her head in her hands, gave vent to her grief in tears and sobs.

Presently, however, there again fell on her ears the sound of music. It was the same song, sang by the same mellow voice, and accompanied by the guitar as before. She raised her head and listened.

Yes ; the gondola again approached. Slowly, silently it glided along over the glassy surface of the waters, till once more it was immediately in front of her window

Naomi gazed, and waited in breathless suspense. She expected to see it glide by as before, and disappear in the distance. But she was mistaken.

The song suddenly ceased, and she heard a sharp word of command addressed to the gondolier, who, with a few rapid sweeps of the oar, shot the craft immediately beneath her window.

The two figures arose, and stepped out to the prow of the boat.

"Claudio—mother !" cried Naomi, "is it indeed you ?"

"Yes, Francesca," said the former sadly ; "you see in me the husband whom you basely, treacherously deserted."

"Oh, say not so, dear Claudio. Spare me your reproaches. You know not how it wrung my heart to be compelled to act as I did."

Claudio made no answer ; but springing lightly from the boat, stood beside her. Then, giving his hand to the Countess Donati, he assisted her also to mount the parapet, and the next instant Naomi was locked in her arms.

"Francesca, my dear, my darling daughter—for such you ever must be to me — do I really behold you again ?"

"O mother, dear mother ! this is indeed a happy meeting. I thought I should never have seen you again."

Unseen to any of the three, the door of the apartment silently opened, and another stood on the threshold.

Habited in a dress of dark Venetian velvet, profusely embroidered and adorned with jewels rare and costly, the Princess Esmeralda—otherwise Rudiga, the Woman in Red—beheld the stolen interview between her daughter and her husband and foster-mother.

"She calls her mother," muttered Esmeralda to herself—"she calls her mother still. Vain are all my efforts—utterly, entirely vain. I cannot crush out the deep love, the growth of infancy, which burns in her breast. I cannot root out the memories of her childhood, or compel her truant affections back to myself. It would seem that all recoil on me and on her innocent head ; for the poor child is very unhappy."

Claudio now addressed his wife.

"Francesca, have you no word for me? Do you not ask my pardon for your cruel desertion?"

She instantly fell on her knees, and clasped him with her hands.

"Your pardon, dear Claudio,—my only love, my husband. I beseech your pardon. I was compelled to act as I did; I had no choice."

"Compelled?"

"Yes, by my oath."

"Perdition seize your oath!" he cried angrily; "'twas not binding in the sight of either God or man."

She sighed deeply, but made no reply. She could not argue with him.

"Francesca," he continued, speaking quickly and impetuously, "I have not sought you out here without an object. I have come to claim my wife. You are miserable. I see it by your wan face and tearful eyes. Come, fly with me to happiness and love. Come, my gondola awaits you. I have horses and a carriage also ready. Before to-morrow's sun rises, we can be leagues away from this living tomb. Come, my love, my life—my wife!"

Francesca's breath came in quick gasps, and her heart beat tumultuously. For a time a conflict prevailed in her mind.

She arose from her knees, and, clasping her hands, gazed piteously, tearfully upon her husband.

"Claudio," she said, in accents of ineffable tenderness, "it cannot be. I have a duty to perform to my mother, now known as the Princess Esmeralda. During my early years she was robbed of

me, her daughter, and it well-nigh broke her heart. It shall be my task to soothe her declining years, and endeavour to provide for her that happiness I can never taste myself. I will never leave her ; nor, without her permission, can I again return to you, my husband. God knows how it wrings my heart to tell you so. I will pray to Heaven for happier days. Claudio—husband—adieu.”

“So you bid me go, Francesca—me, your husband! Good ; let it be as you wish. I obey. Adieu for ever.”

He was about to hand the Countess Donati back into the gondola, and follow himself, when a voice caused him to stop, and turn in astonishment.

“Hold, young sir.”

Then there advanced into the centre of the room the Princess Esmeralda, the Woman in Red.

She was pale and careworn ; but her eyes gleamed with a strange fire. Tears coursed down her cheeks, and her frame shook with emotion.

“I have heard all,” she said, in accents which her greatest efforts could not render firm. “I have heard that gentle angel’s self-denial and self-sacrifice. Surely such devotion deserves some reward.”

She was silent, unable to speak for emotion. Presently she went on :

“Naomi, beloved and dutiful daughter, I have heard you say that never will you consent to leave me without my permission. Can I, ought I, dare I, longer withhold—?”

Her voice rose, and her figure seemed to grow taller and more commanding as she spoke.



"No, Naomi, you have conquered ; you have vanquished my pride, my resentment. I withdraw my refusal. Naomi, daughter, behold your husband. Be happy in each other's love."

With a wild cry of delight, Naomi rushed forward and clasped Claudio in her arms.

"Claudio, Claudio, God has heard my prayer. Look on me, your wife ; look in my eyes ; kiss me, darling. Oh, this is happiness indeed !"

They remained thus for a few moments, when Naomi gently disengaged herself, and, taking him by the hand, led him up to the Woman in Red.

She fell on her knees before her, and caused him to do so likewise.

"Mother, your blessing, to complete our happiness."

"My child, may you be happy, as you deserve ! A new life opens before me. A light breaks in upon me. I know now that I have been in error, and that to win my daughter's love I need not begrudge that which she bears to her husband, and to the lady by whom she was reared. Countess Donati, remain with us, and permit me to share that love with you which neither time, adversity, nor all my efforts, could efface from my daughter's heart."

And now, having witnessed this happy reconciliation, we will let fall the curtain, wishing a long life of happiness, in her daughter's love and gratitude, to  
RUDIGA, THE WOMAN IN RED.

## MISS BRADDON'S NEW NOVEL.

# MOUNT ROYAL.

### Opinions of the Press.

“‘Mount Royal’ is a very readable book, and the interest is sustained by the *dénouement* being left in doubt to the very end of the penultimate chapter.”—*Times*.

‘Miss Braddon’s numerous admirers can hardly fail to have been struck by the remarkable advance shown by her most recent novels, not only in point of style, but in the natural delineation of those phases of modern society which no living writer of fiction treats more agreeably or with more sustained power. The most striking instance of this may, perhaps, be found in “Vixen;” and if the present work is not superior to that charming tale—which would involve excellence of an unexceptionally high order—it will, at least, not suffer from comparison with its predecessor. The plot will be preferred by many, as dealing with the more tragic side of life, and with more serious issues; but, granting that such preference must be a matter of taste, all will admit the touch of a master-hand in development of the action and the carefully artistic treatment which renders each of the *dramatis personæ*, estimable or otherwise, a living sentient being, with human idiosyncrasies and distinct personality. . . The scene, by the bye, in which this episode occurs is unquestionably one of the finest and most dramatic that even Miss Braddon has ever written, and is only to be surpassed in point of intensity by the two still finer interviews between Leonard and his wife, and the remorseful woman and her intended tool, the adventurer De Cazalet. . . We may say, without hesitation, that Miss Braddon has never employed her great talents to better purpose than in “Mount Royal.” It is the worthy work of a thorough artist.’—*Morning Post*.

‘Miss Braddon’s ever-active and ever-fascinating pen has just completed a new work of fiction, entitled “Mount Royal.” If it does not appeal as immediately and powerfully to the feelings as “Lady Audley’s Secret,” or “Lucius Davoren,” or some of the gifted authoress’s more recent novels, such as “Vixen,” it is replete with all the freshness and charm which she has taught the public to expect from her, which makes the book one that will attract by its power as well as charm by its style.’—*Daily Telegraph*.

‘Miss Braddon has never, in our opinion, written a novel at once more clever and more true than this.’—*Morning Advertiser*.

‘The interest is unmistakable, and the way in which this is sustained from first to last proves that its author’s command of the art of storytelling has in no wise diminished.’—*Observer*.

“‘Mount Royal’ is entitled to rank high among our modern works of fiction.”—*Society*.

'Miss Braddon has maintained in "Mount Royal" the standard of her later period.'—*Athenæum*.

'The story is clearly developed and vigorously written.'—*Pall Mall Gazette*.

'"Mount Royal" will not only be found a pleasant seaside companion during the coming season, but a friend in need during many a solitary hour in the country. It is not only one of the best ever written by the author of "Lady Audley's Secret," but one of the most original likewise.'—*Court Journal*.

'To return for a last word to "Mount Royal," the more we have of Miss Braddon, and the less of Miss Rhoda Dendron and Weeder, the better, in our opinion, for all novel-readers, old and young.'—*Punch*.

'As a novelist, she is almost without a rival in the art of plot-weaving; so delicate are her meshes, and so subtle her discrimination, that the inherent interest of her books carries us along with her. She is the high priest of a school which, since she inaugurated it, has had many more or less feeble imitators. . . Painfully and terribly true to life, and rightly understood, "Mount Royal" is capable of making us appreciate truth and purity more heartily than ever.'—*Evening News*.

'The great body of novel-readers who have for so many years found recreation and delight in the brilliant works of imagination which have come from the pen of Miss Braddon, will need no inducement to turn to a new story by this accomplished authoress. As is always the case in Miss Braddon's stories, the characters are powerfully drawn. They are not merely people of whom we read, but seem to enjoy an actual existence during the time that their movements are being followed with such rapt attention. The lives of these inhabitants of the old Cornish manor-house, known as Mount Royal, are not free from the cares and excitement which the world calls sensational, albeit the stronger element is made subordinate to gentler and more subtle influences. Judged relatively to other works, "Mount Royal" must be awarded a place midway between the early impulsiveness of "Lady Audley" and the charming fancy displayed in "Vixen," the novel in which Miss Braddon's maturer style reached its highest excellence. . . Readers will find in "Mount Royal," in its pathetic views of life and love, echoes of their own experience that are sure to command absorbing interest. Miss Braddon's romantic spirit has been in no way quenched; but in this last novel its brighter rays are tempered by experience and the saddening influence of earth's sorrows and troubles.'—*Daily Chronicle*.

'An interesting and clever story. The excitement and expectation are well sustained throughout; the incidents are original, and the characters are neatly drawn. Miss Braddon has written some delightful pictures of scenery in Cornwall.'—*Sunday Times*.

'That Miss Braddon's hand has not lost its cunning is evidenced by the excellent work which she has given us in "Mount Royal." The same skill in construction, the same charm of description as marked her earlier efforts, are all here in this present work, matured and mellowed, it may be, by experience, but not one whit dulled or destroyed by lapse of time. We welcome "Mount Royal." Miss Braddon has given us a story which, while it adds to her fame as an authoress, increases our indebtedness to her: the healthy tone of "Mount Royal" is not one of its least charms.'—*Pictorial World*.

'For one "who has been long in city pent" the pictures of Cornish scenery, drawn by the free bold hand of the authoress, are delightful; no

landscape-painter could produce a more vivid impression. We anticipate that this powerful tragic story will enhance the high reputation of its authoress.'—*Echo*.

'The situations are worked out with so much skill, and the probability of details is so well managed, that the story can be followed with the keenest interest.'—*St. James's Gazette*.

'There is much effective writing in the course of the novel, and we must add that the minor characters are individualised with all the accustomed power of the authoress.'—*News of the World*.

'Miss Braddon never disappoints her readers. Whoever takes up "Mount Royal" will be prepared for an interesting story, excellently well told, and that they will get. Her scenes never fall flat, nor does her weapon ever miss fire. The incidents of her stories are always marshalled with very great skill, so as to produce the best effect which is to be got from them. In fewer words, Miss Braddon is, as our readers know without our telling them, a story-teller of consummate ability. To be able to conceive a thrilling plot is one thing; to be able to work it out in a story is another. Miss Braddon has from the beginning shown that she possesses both these gifts. Her fertility in plot-making is nothing short of marvellous; and when we find that her conceptions are always worked out by the aid of characters of flesh and blood, who stand prominently forth from the canvas, and look at you with living eyes, we are lost in wonder at a fancy, a power, so inexhaustible. Scarcely ever is there a trace of any strain, any fatigue. We might say that she appears to be telling a story for the first time, did not the ease and skill displayed in the process betray to the close observer a vast amount of practice added to natural talents of a high order. Her descriptive power and her dramatic instinct are never weakened. She never fails to bring before the reader the objects of persons she is describing. Moreover, she can describe indirectly as well as directly.'—*Lloyd's Weekly London Newspaper*.

'Many of the descriptions of the scenery of Cornwall are well worth reading; while London fashionable circles are hit off in a vein of satire occasionally, but with a considerable resemblance, we should imagine, to what really takes place. The scene where Cristabel meets Psyche in her own dwelling is full of womanly tenderness, and suggests to the poor victim the existence of a world of compassion of which she had never dreamed. The marshalling and management also of the characters as a whole reveal, it must be admitted, the possession of high artistic powers, as well as a wide observation of men and things. Major Bree is drawn to the life. Mrs. Tregonnell senior, with her mother's fondness for the roving Leonard, is also as true to nature as can well be imagined.'—*Liverpool Mercury*.

'Miss Braddon, if not the most industrious of modern novelists, is certainly unrivalled in this respect among those whose works are in great demand at the circulating libraries. Let the reader once become really interested in the fortunes of the lovely, but unhappy, Mrs. Tregonnell, and he will not willingly put down the book until the end of the third volume.'—*Manchester Examiner and Times*.

'We have followed the plot out with considerable interest, and no fault is to be found in the novel in the way of dullness.'—*John Bull*.

'The scene in which her new novel is chiefly laid is to the full as enchanting as it is painted by her skilful hand. That there is plenty of interest and something to excite in any book from the pen of Miss Braddon may be taken for granted. The ingenuity of the plot is worthy of the author.'—*London Figaro*.

'A most attractive and interesting novel. The genius of Miss Braddon evolves a number of most ingenious plots, and the reader's interest is kept engaged through the development of them with absorbing power. Miss Braddon deals with persons and places that are familiar to us, and her descriptions of the scenery of the north coast, of Tintagel, Boscastle, and all the neighbouring shores, are photographed with great clearness in beautiful language and with perfect knowledge. Miss Braddon's works are always interesting, and these volumes will add to her well-established reputation. There are many phases of life described in them which we know exist; but there are few who have the power of placing either the people or their surroundings so completely before us. She hits off admirably the follies and fashions of the hour as they prevail in fashionable life. So great was the demand for Miss Braddon's new novel, "Mount Royal," the other day, that the circulating libraries subscribed for the whole of the first edition, and the publisher had to go to press immediately with a new impression.'—*Plymouth Western Daily Mercury*.

'In "Mount Royal" Miss Braddon appears to us not only to have surpassed her own previous performances, numerous and successful as they have been, but even to have distanced all her competitors in that class of literature. We know of no recent novel which we would place before "Mount Royal" in its power of exciting the emotions.'—*Sheffield Post*.

'"Mount Royal" is an addition to the Braddon library that will be heartily welcomed by all who can appreciate a sound, healthy, and thoroughly interesting novel.'—*Belfast News Letter*.

'Taking the novel altogether, "Mount Royal" will compare favourably with any that have preceded it from the same pen. In point of character delineation and skilfulness of construction, its merits are very considerable.'—*Bradford Observer*.

'"Mount Royal" is well written, as all Miss Braddon's books are. It is bright, and catches with great accuracy the precise tone of the people whose lives are being sketched. A good novel.'—*Scotsman*.

'"Mount Royal" is powerful and artistic—a finished bit of workmanship.'—*Edinburgh Daily Review*.

'We may fairly say of it that it contains many sparkling passages and many happy thoughts. It shows that the writer has an extensive acquaintance with the best English authors, and it shows that she is an adept in word-painting.'—*Sheffield Daily Telegraph*.

'Miss Braddon's last production is as engrossing, as dramatic, and as fresh as if it were only her second or third. There is not a dull page in the three volumes.'—*Brighton Fashionable Visitors' List*.

'"Mount Royal" is an exceptionally favourable specimen. The story is told with singular nearness, and grace almost equally unusual in works of this kind. The novel is, without doubt, a good and a bright one, with plenty of incidents and plenty of character.'—*Manchester Courier*.

'The story, as a whole, is extremely interesting. It is emphatically a novel of the present day, and we predict for it an extensive demand.'—*York Herald*.

---

LONDON: J. & R. MAXWELL,

MILTON HOUSE, SHOE LANE, FLEET-STREET;

AND ALL BOOKSELLERS.









# MISS BRADDON'S NOVELS

*Price 2s. each; cloth gilt, 2s. 6d.*

1. LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET.
2. HENRY DUNBAR.
3. ELEANOR'S VICTORY.
4. AURORA FLOYD.
5. JOHN MARCHMONT'S LEGACY.
6. THE DOCTOR'S WIFE.
7. ONLY A CLOD.
8. SIR JASPER'S TENANT.
9. TRAIL OF THE SERPENT.
10. LADY'S MILE.
11. LADY LISLE.
12. CAPTAIN OF THE VULTURE.
13. BIRDS OF PREY.
14. CHARLOTTE'S INHERITANCE.
15. RUPERT GODWIN.
16. RUN TO EARTH.
17. DEAD SEA FRUIT.
18. RALPH THE BAILIFF.
19. FENTON'S QUEST.
20. LOVELS OF ARDEN.
21. ROBERT AINSLEIGH.
22. THE BITTER END.
23. MILLY DARRELL.
24. STRANGERS AND PILGRIMS.
25. LUCIUS DAVOREN.
26. TAKEN AT THE FLOOD.
27. LOST FOR LOVE.
28. A STRANGE WORLD.
29. HOSTAGES TO FORTUNE.
30. DEAD MEN'S SHOES.
31. JOSHUA HAGGARD.
32. WEAVERS AND WEFT.
33. AN OPEN VERDICT.
34. VIXEN.
35. THE CLOVEN FOOT.
36. THE STORY OF BARBARA.
37. JUST AS I AM.
38. ASPHODEL.
39. MOUNT ROYAL.
40. THE GOLDEN CALF.
41. PHANTOM FORTUNE.
42. FLOWER AND WEED.
43. ISHMAEL.

*Miss Braddon's other Novels will follow in due succession.*

